HOPALONG CASSIDY RETURNS

Clarence E. Mulford

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By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

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"The Orphan," "Bar 20," "Bar-20 Days," "The Man from Bar 20," "The Bar-20 Three," "The Coming of Cassidy," "Hopalong Cassidy," "Buck Peters, Ranchman," "Bring Me His Ears," "Johnny Nelson," "Black Buttes," "Rustlers' Valley," etc.

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CHAPTER I

PLANS AND ARGUMENTS

TWO grouchy cow-punchers rode knee to knee along the trail, grouchy only in appearance. They had spent most of their lives in each other's company, meeting when mere youths on Buck Peter's new ranch on Snake Creek: the Bar-20. In the years that had passed there had been many changes, some pleasant and some bitter. Leaving the old Bar-20 when distressing range conditions chanced to coincide with needed aid to be given a friend, they had gone up to Montana to help their old-time foreman to whip a range into shape, and rustlers off of it. Gradually the outfit, tightly welded together for so long a time, had broken up. Hopalong Cassidy, losing his wife and son through sickness, had broken from the bounds of the Montana ranch and gone off to seek forgetfulness; but despite his plans, he had not gone alone. Red Connors, whose friendship was like granite, had gone with him to see that Hopalong took as good care of his life under these conditions as he had when life meant more to him.

They had rambled hither and yon, drifted down to the SV ranch in New Mexico, where their friend and bunkhouse mate, Johnny Nelson, now directed a cattle business of his own. But the passing of time brought a restlessness to Hopalong, and a homesickness to Red, who had left his family to ride herd on his wandering friend. They had made certain plans, and were now on the way back to carry out the first of them: they were riding down to visit the old Bar-20 and see what the passing years had done to it.

"There's a little piece of dry country we can cut acrost, an' save a few miles," suggested Hopalong, with a sidewise glance at his companion.

"We ain't crossin' no desert!" snapped Red with an emphasis which is safe only when used with friends. "We ain't even got this south visit over yet; it'll be near a month when we start back, for th' SV, but yo're itchin' for speed already! Th' whole summer an' part of th' fall will be ahead of us. You only made up yore mind three hours ago to ride north, an' now yo're worryin' because we ain't halfway there! I allus said you was a damn fool!"

"Montanny's a long way off," rejoined Hopalong doggedly.

"'Tain't no further off from here than this place was from Montanny!" countered Red, glaring. "Comin' down from th' railroad last year, you made us cross that blasted desert because you itched to see Johnny agin: what th' devil you itchin' about now?"

Hopalong looked off to one side, the lines of his weather-beaten, sun-browned, wind-toughened face

deepening, and into his eyes came an expression that was pitiful. He could see two graves on a windswept Montana hillside—a large grave and a small one. He gulped, and his companion's sidewise glance saw the Adam's apple rise and fall.

Red shook his head sadly and looked straight in front wondering if he ever could get his friend's thoughts off the loss which had changed him so. To lose one's wife and child—he bit his lip: he had a wife and a bright-eyed little girl up there in Montana, whom he had not seen for a year; and it had been his secret hope that his girl and Hopalong Cassidy's mischievous boy—but it was all done with now.

For many years, ever since Red had returned from the Texas gulf-coast range with supplies so necessary to the little Bar-20 ranch just beginning its existence on Snake Creek, and found Hopalong Cassidy getting out of trouble, the two had shared a friendship which nothing ever had cooled. Again and again each had risked his own life for the other; they had shared privations, dangers, hunger and thirst together; many times they had, side by side, looked death in the eye and told it to go to hell; mutual sacrifices had been nearly as common as the day's work. This friendship had been their religion; the sacrifices, the solemn rites.

Neither had ever told the other in words that he was anything more than a mangy coyote or a cross-eyed cow thief, knowing both to be lies; never had either assured the other of his friendship, and their verbal endearments had taken the form of abuse; but God help any outsider who borrowed a leaf from that book!

For the last year Red had ridden close herd on his friend, forsaking all others to ride doggedly and unquestioningly at the side of the man who had lost so much. Gradually Hopalong's steady dejection had faded, and he was beginning to show signs of becoming his old self, although Red was not fool enough to believe that the reversion would be anywhere near complete. At times there came a look on his friend's face that told Red that no matter how little Hopalong had feared death in the old days, he feared it much less now; and once in a while the look said more than that, and Red stuck to him like a shadow. Now that they had decided to return to Montana after their visit to the old Bar-20 ranch and its neighbourhood, Red was beginning to wonder what the end of that long trail would do for his friend. He plainly could see those two graves on the hillside.

The bobbing Adam's apple sent Red back into one of his old stand-bys, and he continued his growling about deserts, a long-standing bone of contention between them.

"Nothin' but lizards, Gilas, horned toads, side-winders an' th' like has got any use for a desert; but you ain't got sense enough to know when yo're well off! 'Tain't that yo're gettin' childish: hell, you was *allus* that way!"

"If I had yore disposition——" began Hopalong with warming interest.

"It'd be plum ruined by now!" interrupted Red.

"I'd go hang myself," continued Hopalong. "You can kick up more damn fuss about a little desert than any man *I* ever knowed!"

"Why wouldn't I?" demanded Red, glaring. "For near twenty years you've knowed I hate a desert worse'n I do a hoss thief, but for near twenty years you ain't been happy unless you was draggin' me over one! If there's any in these United States that you ain't fried me on it's only because you ain't never heard tell of it! You've even drug me into Mexico, an' fried me there! I'm tellin' you we ain't crossin' no deserts we can ride around: that's flat!"

"Flat as yore head!" retorted Hopalong. He glanced at the repeating Winchester in his friend's saddle scabbard and sneered.

Red looked at the huge, single-shot Sharps in Hopalong's saddle sheath, and snorted.

"Huh!" said Hopalong.

"Huh!" said Red.

After a ride in pugnacious silence, Hopalong grunted and cleared his throat.

"Mebby we're a pair of fools to ride back to th' old ranch," he said. "It'll be terrible changed. There'll be wire fences, irrigatin' ditches, dams, railroads, schoolhouses an' churches. It'll mebby make us sick."

"We usually are a pair of fools when we're together," replied Red. "Reckon we'll find any of th' old crowd on th' other ranches?"

"Don't know; but we got to go an' find out."

"What's th' cow country comin' to, anyhow?" demanded Red, with feeling.

"To a better land," answered Hopalong, thoughtfully. "Might as well be honest about it, much as it hurts. It's crops, an' towns an' schoolhouses that

make a country; but it shore is an awful dose to swaller. Times are changin', Red: we're outa step."

Red's amazement at his friend's calm acceptance of what was to him a calamity was too much for words.

"You hear a lot of bellerin' from old-time cowmen about th' good old days bein' gone forever," continued Hopalong. "They were good old days, for cowmen, an' they done their part. They had to be; an' they had to go. Of course it'll be a long time before th' open range is all gone. Th' edges 'll go first, an' along th' streams an' railroads. It's th' last that 'll count, an' count fast. It would take a long time for th' farmers to work through th' cow country if they could only inch in from th' edges; but now that they're workin' both ways in th' middle of th' range, from three, four railroads, it'll move fast. You don't reckon I'd 'a' let William, Jr., grow up to be a cow-puncher, do you, if he'd lived?"

Red muffled a curse. There it was again: swinging back to the one thought uppermost. Hopalong had taken delight in looking forward to the training of his son, to making an upstanding man out of him. He had molded Johnny Nelson into a man who was a credit to any community, and he had been anxious to mold his son into another. Red changed the subject.

"When we get through down South an' get back to th' SV, are we stayin' very long with Johnny, or pushin' right on?"

"We'll stay a day or two," replied Hopalong, his face clouding. Johnny Nelson was very close to his

heart. "Funny how a man changes his mind. When we left Montanny last year for th' SV, I figgered I could spend th' rest of my days there. Huh! Red, do you know that we're just a couple of tramps? Respectable, an' above stealin' an' beggin': but tramps, just th' same? What chance has a breed like ourn got that's allus rollin' on, to hold th' range ag'in' a bunch like nesters, that settle down an' take root? We're tramps. We're likewise a pair of fools. Who but two fools would start from th' SV to ride hoss-back to Montanny? There's railroads, ain't there?"

Red flared. "Yes; but who'd ride on th' damn things while he had a cayuse? You know what'd happen to th' railroads if I had my way, don't you?"

Hopalong laughed. "Ain't no use bitin' me, Carrot-Top! I hate 'em worse'n you do. We admits we hate 'em; but so does folks hate nasty medicine. They take it just th' same. Only two fools would choose cayuses an' a trail near two thousan' miles long, when they could go by train."

This was the task they had set for themselves. After their return to the SV for a few days' visit they would start for another ranch, up in Montana, where most of their old-time outfit worked for their old-time foreman, and where range conditions were more to their liking. Spring had come upon them and tempted them to make the journey on horseback, since their time was their own, and they both hated trains. To go over the old trails again, keeping spring with them part of the way, would be worth the effort; to live over in memory days that would come no more, and to review conditions

already past; to test their memories of trails and old-time fords; to find dead towns which they once had known alive, and new towns where none had been. All this was a sufficient lure, and did not need the added zest of possible adventures which might be dumped out on them from fate's big bag. They had plenty of money, were accustomed to long distances in the saddle, and to hardships, and they looked forward to that ride with a keen eagerness.

"Tramps, huh?" grunted Red, scowling.

"Tramps," said Hopalong, nodding.

They topped a hill and started down the slope toward a nester's house situated in a mess of barbed wire. His land was divided into small parcels bearing different kinds of crops, and each was separated from those around it by three strands of wire. The outer, inclosing fence, was of five strands.

"Betcha he's got a barb-wire watch chain," growled Red in strong disgust.

"Betcha he's been pestered sick by cows," chuckled Hopalong, who knew that hatred for the nester. "Still hate 'em, don't you, Carrot-Top?"

"No more'n you do!" retorted Red, savagely.

"Yes," answered his companion. "I still hate 'em, though I know I'm wrong. Habit, I reckon. Just th' same, they're tryin' to make a livin' th' only way they know how. They're makin' th' country an' they've come to stay."

After tying their animals a safe distance from the outer fence they headed for the house, and had to open and close three gates, all liberally strung with barbed

wire. As they reached the porch they heard a hail and looked up to see a man running toward them.

"Got 'em yet?" called the nester carefully, climbing a barbed wire fence.

"Loco," grunted Hopalong.

"Most nesters are," replied Red dogmatically, looking at the fences as if they were proof of his statement. "Ever see so much wire on so little ground?"

"Did they git away?" asked the nester, climbing another fence. He paused to loosen carefully the seat of his trousers from a barb. "They oughta be wrapped in a green hide an' left in th' sun, damn 'em!"

"Lots *he* knows about a green hide," muttered Red.

"Heard tell about 'em, I reckon," replied his companion.

Safely over the last fence the nester hurried toward them, but stopped short a few paces away and stared at Hopalong. Then he swore softly.

"Damn! Took ye fer th' sheriff, an' a deppity! But mebby ye are?"

"Only a couple of pilgrims," said Hopalong. "Stopped to get a drink an' fill our canteens. So I look like th' sheriff, huh?"

"Dead ringer, even to yore hoss. Shore you ain't him?"

At their denial he looked a little suspicous, but his expression changed as he took in the details of their persons. They in no way resembled the descriptions of the Ferret or Janssen, and their red hair was an assurance that neither was Mesquite Jenkins. He beamed on them, and hoped if the three desperadoes

paid him a visit they would do so before these craggy persons had left the premises.

"Set a while, strangers. Have a little somethin' to clear a way for th' water?"

The two friends grinned and nodded, and spoke the same words in unison.

"Don't mind if we do!"

"Wait a shake," said the host, hurrying into the house, and in a few moments he was becoming pleasantly acquainted with his guests.

"You said somethin' about us gettin' somethin'," suggested Hopalong.

"Yeah: th' snakes that robbed Sim Porter an' killed Nancy Smithers," said the nester, and told them about the crimes. The robbery, audacious as it had been, was swept out of their minds by the brutal and revolting murder of the woman.

"She must 'a' met th' Ferret while he was escapin', an' mebby got in his way," said their host. "Her throat was cut, an' knife play is th' Ferret's long suit. They say he'll kill fer th' fun of watchin' th' blood spurt out."

The visitors' replies were appropriate, and after an hour's talk the two travellers arose and departed, following their host's directions toward the nearest water, which was Willow Creek.

As they paused on the top of the ridge they smiled at the tiny pasture across the placid stream, set like a jewel between the clean sand of the creek bed and the straggling line of timber just beyond. Here was grass, water, and fuel, and here they would spend the night

The streams had been getting farther apart and they knew they were coming to the fringe of the desert stretch which already had given them a bone for their wrangling.

"Don't reckon we can improve on that," said Hopalong, scanning the pasture. "We got plenty of time, an' I feel like loafin' th' rest of th' day. Be good chance to wash up, too."

"It's mebby th' last water for a long ride," rejoined Red, scowling as he pictured the hated Staked Plain.

Hopalong smiled. "Owin' to yore bull-headed nature we ain't crossin' no desert this trip. We'll go round it. I see I gotta humour you like a baby."

"Since that nester said you looked like th' sheriff you've been all swelled up," retorted Red. "You ain't got sense enough to reckon that lookin' like th' sheriff is mebby dangerous around here right now." He sneered. "Surprised you ain't never run for sheriff."

Hopalong chuckled. "Seein' th' mess you made of th' job, besides near gettin' married to that Wallace girl, I ain't been hankerin' for no sheriff's job."

Red flushed. He was a married man now, but he did not marry Stell Wallace. He was glad on both counts; but the way she had led him on, and then thrown him into the discard for a preacher did not set lightly on him. This was some years before, and he had mooched around with a broken heart, fearing that it would not prove fatal, and the perspective given by the passing of time made him smart by the picture it showed him: the picture of a red-headed fool, a fool past all belief.

"Ain't you never goin' to forget nothin' that ever happened?" demanded Red, with heat. "When it comes to rakin' over damn fool things outa th' past, I got a two-hand rake of my own! Yo're th' last man on earth that wants to start any rakin', when *I'm* around, an' you know it! Couple more peeps outa you, an' I'll give you somethin' to listen to!"

Hopalong looked coldly into his friend's eyes.

"Some rainy day when we're back with th' rest of th' boys, I'll rake with you, an' leave it to a vote. You got a lot of gall blattin' about *yore* two-hand rake. There ain't no man on earth that's made as many fool plays as *you* have!"

"Huh!" snorted Red, leading the way down the slope. "*You* look like th' sheriff! He's got my sympathy! Come on, you cow thief."

They wrangled down the hill, across the creek and while they put the camp in order, stopping only when they had run out of the more prominent reminiscences of asinine episodes; but truth compels the admission that Red dug up three to his companion's one.

Hopalong looked around the camp and then at the creek.

"'Tain't deep enough to swim in," he said; "but I can get wet all over."

"'Bout time, too," said Red, picking up his rifle. "I'm goin' off an' shoot somethin' to eat. Anyhow, th' crick won't be fit for me to wash in for a long time after you get through."

"Huntin', huh?" grunted Hopalong. "It's a good thing we got plenty of grub!"

Red scorned to reply and drifted into the brush. As the best shot in the Southwest he did not have to defend himself against the slurs of any man, not even the best revolver expert he ever had seen.

Hopalong fooled around the camp, but finally undressed and went in the creek, whose waters, although very warm, felt good. He was generous in his use of the soap and tossed it up on the bank, rinsing himself well before he followed it. He was parading for the sun and the wind to dry him when a head raised behind the farther bank and a Colt roared.

CHAPTER II

THE SIDEWINDER

WHILE Hopalong and Red had been riding southward on the way to the old ranch, three desperadoes were active in another direction, and now were resting after a hard flight. They were the three men spoken of by the nester, and one of them was riding steadily southward toward the nester's part of the country even while he spoke of them. The rider was called Mesquite Jenkins, and there were good reasons for his riding: safety, revenge, and the desire to find and meet a man whom he had never seen, but about whom he had heard so much that he had made him the idol of his adolescent youth. This man was Hopalong Cassidy and, learning that Hopalong was at the SV ranch, Mesquite had started out to visit him; but events took place that broke the even tenor of his riding, and that these events shall be known it is best to run back to that desperado camp and pick up the threads. The camp was miles away from Willow Creek, and off the straight line from the trail to the SV ranch; but a man is but a child of circumstances.

Mesquite Jenkins, facing his companions in crime, drew back from the brilliant greasewood fire and looked across it, impatient at the loss of time in his riding and disgruntled by what he had allowed himself to get into.

"Like coyotes, we are," he growled. "Eatin' poor grub, livin' in fear of our own shadders, hangin' round th' edge of th' desert, swallerin' sand an' alkali in our eatin', drinkin' an' breathin'. I've had too damned much of it!"

The little man across from him tossed a handful of greasewood on the blaze and watched its sizzling, popping, sputtering flare.

"It's better'n Judge Lynch," he mumbled, looking at Mesquite through narrowed lids. To his face came an expression remarkably like the cunning leer of a fox, momentarily dominating his habitual expression of stark cruelty. "Our trail's two weeks old. They lost it. Give 'em another week to go back to their reg'lar jobs. This place just suits me."

Mesquite idly picked up another plant stem and tossed it on the fire, swore at its sudden stink, smelled his fingers and looked from the Ferret to Janssen. The latter's broad face was expressionless, almost stupid, for the man ran to bulk and tremendous physical strength. He was the third factor in a temporary and deadly combination, his stolid, unimaginative nature rounding out the attributes of the trio. The conversation had made little impression on him, not enough to shift his gaze from the explosive fire, from which now came a thread of malodorous smoke, the contribution of the stinkweed.

"Yeah," drawled Mesquite. "Reckon it would suit *you*. To me it stinks like that," pointing to the poorly burning stinkweed stem. He pulled out his tobacco sack, dumped the few grains of fine, dry dust

in his hand and then hurled dust and sack into the fire. "Huh! Suits *you!*" he sneered.

The Swede awkwardly tossed his own sack at Mesquite's crossed legs.

"Der's some," he grunted placidly.

Mesquite tossed it back again, his scowling face a gargoyle in the flickering firelight, but before it struck the ground the Ferret's lean hand darted out and caught it. The greediness of the motion and the look on his face deepened Mesquite's sneer, and the youngster continued:

"I'm ridin' on real soon. They couldn't 'a' got a look at our clothes in that light, an' all they can remember of our faces is th' handkerchiefs. We made a mistake, leavin' town at all. I want smokin', an' I'm goin' to get it."

The Ferret grinned, and his grin was something which Mesquite was beginning to regard with a curious and flaming hatred. It was too oily, too smirky, too ingratiatingly greasy, patently false to the real nature of the man. Mesquite knew him to be as coldly ferocious as the animal whose name he had been given, that he loved cruelty and blood as much as any member of the weasel family. Something in the youth's nature rebelled at everything the other stood for. He eyed the grin, recognized its obvious hypocrisy, and thought that the fox in his companion was becoming too plain these days. The grin was thoroughly foxlike, but the little eyes burning like coals under the sloping forehead gave it the lie. No matter what traits he might endeavour to assume, the Ferret was a

ferret still. Each of these men had their share of the robbery, and for some days Mesquite had detected something in the Ferret's eyes that he did not like.

"That's all right for you," cunningly replied the Ferret, serenely confident of outwitting this youth who had not yet reached twenty. "Yo're built like eight out of ten of th' men you'll meet. There's two dozen like you in both them towns. You could 'a' slipped into th' line-up at any bar an' been safe. Janssen an' me couldn't. There ain't another man hereabouts that looks like either of us. Where you aimin' to ride to?"

"Johnsville," answered Mesquite, "an' then I'm goin' on to a ranch—alone!"

"Yohnsville ban best," grunted Janssen.

"Sheriff's just as likely to be there as at Cactus," said the Ferret, his beady eyes sparkling with a sudden thought. His gun-fighting companion, banking on his average stature, overlooked one thing, and that was enough to hang him. Even during his short stay in the town he had been identified with the seven-foot Swede and the little wizened man; and both the latter had been glimpsed in their getaway. They had left town by different directions, and met again when well beyond it; but the Ferret had let his lust for killing turn a robbery into something which had aroused the whole country to a pitch of rage beyond all precedent. This his companions did not know, and he dared not tell them; but he was over-jealous of the secret, over-alert to keep it hidden, so suspicious of careless words and looks that he had aroused a feeling of distrust in the youth.

This had grown steadily and rapidly. There was another factor that widened the breach: these three men, so entirely unsuited to each other for constant association, had been uninterruptedly together for too long a time; and little things which would have called for a laugh in the companionship of others now threatened to become deadly.

Mesquite looked at the little man calmly, provocatively, restraining the annoying urge of his wizard gun hand. During their swift and hard-pressed flight, their twistings and turnings, and the cunningly contrived doubling under the lead of the Ferret which had brought them to safety under the very noses of their enemies; during the idle loafing in this desert hiding place within a day's ride of either town, where they had rested while the posses searched farther afield—during all this time Mesquite had felt his gorge rising, and knew that if he remained in the other's company another day a quarrel would flare up like the eager flames of a greasewood fire and end in swift death to one or both.

"They must 'a' been mad as hell to chase us like they did," commented Mesquite thoughtfully. "Seemed like it was somethin' personal, somethin' pizen an' desperate in every man of 'em. I could *feel* it!"

The Ferret closed his eyes for a moment and then opened them to grin again, and he held the grin unchanged while the expression of the youth's face made him vibrate with the feeling of quick, close danger. He estimated the distance across the little fire, but found the other's eyes riveted to his own, and he

dropped the lids to mask the lust that blazed in them.

"I can mebby explain that," he said, chuckling to keep the other's animosity from crystallizing into a sudden exposition of deadly sleight-of-hand. He had a vast and wondering respect for the youth's draw, which baffled sight; and he knew the gunman to be swaying perilously toward an overt act. It never would do to chance another day with him; he must be killed while he slept.

"Yeah?" drawled Mesquite softly, almost caressingly.

"Yes. We took it off Sim Porter, with his outfit close by. It was a personal loss, an' a personal insult."

"Huh!" muttered Mesquite doubtfully. "I dunno. They was deadly as wolves. I could feel th' hatred in th' air. Janssen, what you think?"

The Swede puffed calmly at his reeking pipe, and took a long time to consider it, turning it over and over in his mind; then he shook his head. "Ay tank you talk vords—yust vords."

The Ferret sneered. "Any meanin' that ain't two-plus-two would sound like words, an' nothin' else, to *him*." That was too subtle for Janssen.

"Ya-as, maype; but Ay ban feel fooney w'en Ay tank about das chase," said Janssen hopelessly, helplessly and awkwardly. "Ay don't know yust how to say it."

Mesquite's glance had flashed from the Ferret to the Swede and back again, his gun hand bothering him, his

whole body tingling with suspicion and hostility. The Ferret's lids narrowed again, and the gleam in the weazel eyes was cold and stark. They peered out through the merest slits to baffle the gunman's searching gaze. It must be plain indeed if Janssen felt it!

For half a minute the two stared at each other across the noisy fire, one trying to read, the other to keep him from doing it. Mesquite's eyes were wide open, frankly suspicious and accusing, for he was so intent on his visual inquiries that he forgot to hide what he should have hidden. From the Ferret's eyes only the reflected glint from the flickering fire told that he was watching the gunman, watching almost breathlessly. The guilty knowledge of a damnably atrocious murder did not bother him of itself; but the crime seemed to be spreading through the darkness and calling out his guilt. For days he had not been able to act naturally, and the more he had tried to do so, the more he had failed.

Mesquite appeared to relax, but the Ferret was too cunning to be caught like that, and he only smiled. His own speed of hand for knife throwing was known to his companions, and in the Mesquite's wariness he read that knowledge and a deep respect for his deadliness. Then the gunman slowly and clumsily arose from his cross-legged position, but not for an instant did he allow himself to get into a posture which would cramp or interfere with his draw. The Ferret still smiled, a cold sneer flickering about his pale, thin lips.

He watched Mesquite pick up his saddle and step

farther and farther back into the encircling gloom, until at last only his cheek bones greasily reflected the light of the fire. During that slow retreat the Ferret, frozen by the knowledge that every added foot operated in favour of the gun as against the knife; rigid with the knowledge that to move, to speak, even to change the expression on his face, might instantly crystallize the gunman's thoughts into precipitate and eye-baffling action; knowing that he made a fair target, picked out of the darkness by the firelight, and one the other would not miss; knowing that he was standing in the Open Door, he sat immovable, his face set, his chest barely rising and falling. And as he sat there like a statue a cold rage was flooding him from scalp to toes. For this strain and torment he some day would take full payment.

Janssen, bulking huge in the light of the hissing fire, felt uncomfortable without knowing why, and shifted his position as he looked curiously after the departing gunman. He turned up the collar of his coat, wriggled in his loose clothing, and reached his great, thick hands toward the blaze. The chill of the desert's night air seemed to have increased swiftly in the last few minutes.

"Ay ban colt," he growled. "T'row on some greasewood, Yimmy. It burns like tinder."

The Ferret ignored him, scarcely heard him, and kept his position unchanged. The light on the cheek bones had died out, but still he did not move. There came the tinkle of a cinch ring striking other metal, a leathery creak, and then milling hoofs, but the dark-

ness hid all movement. Then the gunman's voice reached the two at the fire. It was harsh, dry, strained.

"So-long, Janssen."

"Vat you mean?" asked the Swede in surprise. "You ban go away, Mesquite?"

He listened for an answer, but it did not come. When the sounds of the horse died away, he turned to his companion, and then squinted at the beads of sweat standing out on the sloping forehead. The Ferret's face glistened with moisture.

"Yimminy! An' Ay ban feel colt!"

"Comin' or stayin'?" suddenly demanded the Ferret bounding to his feet. With Mesquite roaming in the darkness there would be no sleep for the little man that night, unless he shifted. He still tingled with apprehension, any moment fearing a shot.

"Vat?" asked Janssen, astonished. He felt of the tobacco sack in his pocket, and glanced at the scanty pile of provisions at the edge of the firelight. "T'ought ve vas goin' to stay here a vile more?"

"*Did* you?" grunted the Ferret, his mind on other things. He wiped a sleeve across his face and glared into the night. "You damned big fool!" he snarled as the meaning of the words crept through a rift in his thoughts. "You've been looking death in the face an' didn't have brains enough to know it! Meet you a month from to-night at the cabin!" An evil grin twisted his face. "Mesquite won't bother us if he goes to either of them towns. He's near as dumb as you!" He whirled around and left the fire.

"I stay here a vile yet, vere it's safe," said Janssen,

blinking at the fire. He heard the swift departure of another horse, and was alone on the desert. Emptying his stinking pipe he reached for his blankets, ready to spend the rest of the night in deep and tranquil sleep. "Vere it's safe," he grunted as he snuggled down.

The desert chill grew swiftly as the fire shrank, but there remained enough of the flickering light to glisten sinuously on something which moved sluggishly from the east to the west along the ground; a steely, flexible length of reflected light, travelling with a peculiar, sidewise motion toward the blanket-swathed bulk near the fire, where a gratifying animal heat could be found. Reaching the sleeping man the glistening streak moved back and forth along the blanket, and then slowly flowed around the upper end as the weak fire died out altogether.

The sleeper stirred, fumbled clumsily at something coiled on his labouring chest, then screamed curses and clutched the writhing sidewinder with viselike hands. Again and again and again a flattened, ovate head struck viciously at the only bare skin within its reach, under which pumped the swiftly coursing jugular stream, a stream now loaded with jet after jet of venom.

CHAPTER III

THE STRIKER STRUCK

MESQUITE was halfway to Johnsville when day broke, and the coming of light seemed to clarify the doubts in his mind. This was the direct way to the SV ranch, and he had ridden three hundred miles so far to get to that ranch. He had let himself get cleaned out at poker when he had put up for the night in Johnsville, and had been forced to stay there several days in hope of recouping some of his losses; and necessity had thrown him in with his two recent companions. They saw that he did not starve, and they got him in their debt; and then, when they judged the time to be ripe, had argued him into acting as lookout while they "turned a trick." He was no moralist, he had no experience to draw upon, and the money had been obtained easily, and pointed out the way of obtaining more. Only his determination to visit a ranch he never had seen, and the personality of the Ferret had caused him to break away from his two partners in crime.

He followed a rock ridge to where it cut across the Cactus-Johnsville trail, thus leaving no tracks, and swung along the main highway, the prints of his horse lost in a multitude of others. The trail dipped into a deep arroyo and twisted up the other bank, passing

a narrow gully at an angle. Caution made him go on foot up the east bank to see if any travellers were in sight, and not a quarter of a mile from him rode two men whom he knew at a glance; the sheriff and a deputy.

Mesquite slipped back to his horse, led it carefully into the gully and scattered dry leaves over the faint tracks. Then he hid himself and waited for the riders to pass by.

They came steadily nearer and soon he could make out their words.

"Don't know his name," said the sheriff. "Never saw him before he showed up in town a couple days before th' robbery. Didn't take much notice of him, but some of th' boys did. Ain't no doubt he was in it. He was hangin' round with th' Ferret an' Janssen, an' when they disappeared, *he* disappeared."

"Wonder if he had a hand in butcherin' Nancy Smithers," queried the deputy.

"That was th' Ferret's work!" snapped the sheriff. "He's off his head when it comes to usin' a knife. Nobody but him would 'a' killed a harmless woman, or butchered her like that if he did kill her. No matter what I do with th' other two if I get 'em, I know what I'll do with th' Ferret. Lemme get my——"

Mesquite strained to hear the rest of it, but the words had become too faint. He caressed the handle of his gun, the Ferret's evil face in his mind. From what he had heard of their careless talk about their cabin rendezvous he had a pretty shrewd idea of where it lay. He waited until it was safe to leave his hiding place and then rode rapidly away, eager to do

the sheriff's work for him, and to that extent ease his own feelings.

For three days he rode hard, covering his trail by every trick he knew, and despite his youthfulness he knew plenty of them. Experience would perfect them, but they would serve him in his present need. He made use of three creeks and several great stretches of rocky ground, and now he felt secure from any pursuit. There would be nothing to fear for another day, and then he would need all his wits against a man old in experience, and filled with animal cunning. When Willow Creek was reached he would have to watch for the Ferret supposedly ahead of him.

The Ferret was not ahead of him, for he was too cunning to lead the way to the cabin and have a deadly enemy on his trail. The Ferret did not believe that the youngster was stupid enough to ride in the direction of Johnsville, and had taken the remark as having been made to throw him off; so he circled wide and killed time until assured that Mesquite was well on his way. The gunman, not knowing the exact or even approximate location of the cabin, would have to hunt for it, and the Ferret would settle matters to his own satisfaction. When the little man swung in the direction of his rendezvous with the Swede, intending to lay low there until the other arrived, he wasted no effort in trying to pick up the gunman's trail, knowing this to be useless for a while: he knew where the trail would lead.

The Ferret pushed on at a steady lope, which he would hold until he came to the upper reaches of Willow Creek. From there on he would use the coyote cunning

which had made him famous, or infamous, depending on the viewpoint.

Willow Creek was still half a day's ride when Mesquite accidentally came to a tiny spring under a mass of boulders, the shrinking waters of which were sucked up by the sand before they had gone a hundred yards. He was tired, his horse was tired, and he knew the value of a rest where horseflesh was concerned. Swinging from the saddle he stripped it off, picketed the horse to graze on the scanty grass about the wetted sand and prepared a fire of dry wood, whose tenuous column of smoke would broadcast no warning to hostile eyes. A small frying pan and a coffee pot made the total of his culinary equipment, and both soon were resting on the blaze.

The Ferret's empty canteen warned him to consider mileage, and the warning was given added weight by the condition of his mount. Willow Creek lay a full day's ride to the southwest, but half a day's ride more to the east was Boulder Spring, not known to many. It would take him to a good noon camp, and from it on to the creek was but half a day's travel. There was no reason save instinctive caution that made the little man scout about before he rode up to the spring, but as on many previous occasions the caution saved him. To his surprise he saw the gunman sitting cross-legged before his cunning fire, calmly eating and drinking. The Ferret's beady eyes glinted and a ghastly grin played on his face. Here was luck! Here was his quarry open to his attack, unsuspicious, placidly eating. Here was food, water, plunder; here

was revenge and the assurance of future safety! It was like a draft of cold air to a fevered brow. Should he return to his horse for his rifle, or allow himself the pleasure given by his favourite weapon? This he decided quickly.

The Ferret slipped among the boulders, working closer and closer to his victim with the stealth and cunning of a predatory cat. Foot by foot, yard by yard, he advanced, down wind of the grazing horse and secure from its curiosity. He fixed his eyes on a ledge rising up the height of a man behind a bulwark of boulders, the space between the two forming a natural trench. From that spot he could throw hard and true. He fixed his gaze on the base of Mesquite's neck and in his mind's eye he could see the pulsing jugular under the skin; but he did not make the mistake of looking too long and steadily. He had known men to be warned by a steady gaze.

With infinite patience he approached the ledge, all his interest on the fire, gained it and crouched behind the wall of rocks, peering through an interstice at the unsuspecting youngster not thirty feet away. He set his foot solidly, the right foot a step to the rear; he tensed himself, swinging the right side and shoulder back, his right arm going out behind. In his hand lay the heavy throwing knife, its point and double edge razor keen.

Mesquite leaned over to reach for the coffee pot, his head for a moment turned away, and in that moment the Ferret straightened out of his crouch and his upraised hand reached swiftly backward over the rim of

the ledge to poise for the briefest instant; but something streaked to meet it from the hot sand above, and the driving fangs hung in the flesh, so deeply had they been driven. Even this shock did not stop the motion already begun, and the hand flashed forward, but flashed wildly, without aim or direction, and from the thrower's throat came an exclamation of terror.

Mesquite whirled and shot like a streak of light, dropped the smoking gun into its holster and hurried toward the boulders and the ledge, not for one moment doubting the sureness of his aim. He rolled the body over with a contemptuous, careless foot and then ducked back with a strangled curse: the flashing head had barely missed him. He drew his gun and was about to kill the snake when he checked himself. His mental picture of that open mouth did not show the fangs, and he looked down at the outflung hand near his feet. Two fangs, their points embedded in the meta-carpals, gave him the explanation.

"Much obliged, Wriggly," he grunted, bowing to the coiled reptile, whose whirring rattles now whirred a lie, and he turned back to finish his meal, chuckling with satisfaction. After he had eaten he rode on again, not knowing that he was going to see Hopalong Cassidy before the day was over. He reached Willow Creek—doubted his eyes, and shot by purely reflex action.

CHAPTER IV

IMAGINATION

HOPALONG, standing on the bank of the creek, gasped and staggered, vaguely conscious of a shot close by. The dogged persistence and grim courage which had emblazoned his name high throughout the Southwest sent him reeling into the thicket, hardly knowing what he was doing, First he must get out of sight and then try for his guns.

On the other side of the creek, Mesquite held up a smoking gun, cursing the nervous horse that had made him shoot high, and the persistence of his pursuers. How had they figured he would pass this way? Had they captured Janssen and made him talk? Had they learned about the cabin, and figured he would head for it? He had no doubt that the man he had just shot was Sheriff Dutton: the man's face was not the only thing, for his limp, and the horse grazing near the creek would admit of no doubt. Mesquite cursed this unexpected danger so close to him when he had believed himself secure from any pursuit, and he whirled his tired horse and spurred away, desperately anxious to get a start on the deputies.

Ordinarily Red Conners would have paid slight attention to a shot, but to his mind came what he had heard from the nester. Ten minutes after the report

had died away, Red pushed through the brush and entered the camp.

"Here, Red," answered Hopalong, dragging himself from the thicket. "Creased me. Shot without warnin', cold an' deliberate. Never mind me: get that——! I tell you I'm all right: *get* him!"

"Told you lookin' like a sheriff was sometimes dangerous!" growled Red, picking up his friend and carrying him to a little sandy niche in the bank, from where he would have to watch only in one direction. He hastened back to him with clothing and weapons, canteen and food, cursed him affectionately, then ran toward his saddle.

The tracks were plain, and told of speed and a direct flight; but to Red's eyes they also told of a weary horse. He leaned forward slightly and spoke to his mount, and thereupon the wind whistled past his ears. After an hour's riding he sighted the fugitive climbing a rise. The other looked back and strove to increase the speed of his horse, which was not wise after the long, hard journey it had made from the Cactus-Johnsville trail.

Mesquite's backward glance showed him that he was being hotly pursued by one man. Then a bullet screamed past his ear, and another tore the sombrero from his head. Again he glanced back and saw the rifleman racing on again. He was all of a thousand yards distant, but he had shot as if it were a quarter of that range. Mesquite told himself it was lucky shooting. No man could come so close twice in succession, against a running target, at a thousand yards, except by luck; and then he cursed as a red-hot welt

sprang across the top of his shoulder and he felt the hot blood trickling down his back and chest. He instantly reversed himself about that question of luck, and looked eagerly ahead of him at a thicket, which rose up among and around masses of tumbled rocks and boulders; and he exulted as he neared it. It were suicide to flee on a slowing horse from a man who shot as if he were the devil straight from hell; but once in that cover he would show the deputy what shooting was!

His mount wavered, and swift spurs covered its heaving sides with blood; and at the edge of the thicket Mesquite leaped from the saddle and landed behind a line of boulders as a lead splotch appeared on the rock and a wailing scream died out in the sky. He didn't give a second thought to the canteen and the food on his horse: he could get them after dark, when he would be on his way again, and once more free from pursuing enemies. Playing I-spy among the rocks was one of the best things he did.

He crept swiftly among the boulders to get away from this place and to hole up within sight of it, there to wait and let the other do the hunting, or until night fell and gave him a chance to steal the other's comparatively fresh horse and get away. He wriggled and crept farther and farther back, moving higher and higher up the gentle slope. At last he came to a nest of rocks which overlooked the whole edge of the cover, and once among them he would be content to watch and wait. He peered out between two boulders and caught sight of the grazing horse, picketed well to the west. There

was no sign of its owner, but sooner or later he would move about; and if he moved about, in due course he would show himself for a moment.

Mesquite was pushing himself back, feet first, among the rocks of the nest, when he caught sight of a shadow moving on a boulder between him and the edge of the cover, and he shifted his rifle a few inches, peering along the sights. The shadow grew and took on the shape of a man's head and sombrero, and the fugitive chuckled as he estimated the range, which was point blank, and he tightened his finger on the trigger. Then the shadow flowed back again, and he grunted in disappointment. The deputy was choosing the far side of the boulder for his advance. That meant he would come into sight from behind it on the right, and Mesquite intended to be ready for him.

He sneered as a sombrero arose from behind the rock, and he held his fire. It moved gently up and down, inviting him; but it invited in vain. Only a tenderfoot would bite on a bait like that. The position in which he lay was cramping for a shot to the right, and he pushed back farther into the opening among the rocks so his head and shoulders would clear the rock he lay behind and let him twist to its other side for a better shot. The fool still moved his sombrero up and down, as if any one with sense would let drive at a thing like that, and give away his position!

Shifting quickly, Mesquite's legs pushed against a piled up mass of debris stacked there against the rocks by some high wind; and with the pressure of his knees there came something which made him jump

convulsively. The impact of a weighty body and two sharp, stinging punctures in his leg. Across his mind flashed the picture of the end of the Ferret, and then to his nostrils came a sudden, rank gust of the copperhead odour. The jump had carried him a little wide of the protecting rock, and he no sooner had touched the ground again than he rolled part away over and lay limp.

The sharp rifle crack from the right was followed by a cloud of gray-white smoke, drifting gently with the wind, and Red Connors slowly arose, pumping another cartridge into the chamber of his weapon, although he knew he would have no immediate use for it. He was hatless, and the hot sun on his thin hair was not agreeable. He watched the victim of his shot, and then decided to have a quick look at him for the sake of formality, and climbed up the slope.

Red sniffed suspiciously before the rock pile, and searched for signs of snakes. He found none, and his widening glance showed him why a made-to-order snake den contained no reptiles. All around the rock pile the ground was covered with layers of cactus leaves without a break, except where the fugitive had cleared a way through them with the butt of his rifle. Red stooped and examined some of the stems, but they had dried out, and he could not be sure of what he suspected. If a chaparral cock had placed them there it must have been a long time ago.

He went around the rock and glanced at the figure huddled beside it, but his gaze immediately settled on a small, partly dried organ cactus which had fallen

across one of the legs. He reached over and picked it up, eyeing it curiously. It resisted his first, careless effort, not because of its deceptive weight alone, but also because two of its longest, thickest spines had gone through the fugitive's trousers and skin, and deep into the flesh beneath them. Red tossed it aside, greatly puzzled, and went down the slope to get his sombrero off the plant on which it bobbed up and down in the wind, a tempting bait for a rifleman, but more useful to show falsely a man's position. He mounted and rode back toward the creek, his suspicions gradually becoming accepted.

"Huh! Imagination's a great thing. Shore as shootin' he reckoned he was struck by a snake!"

Back at the rock pile Mesquite opened his eyes, weak, dazed and utterly confused. He lay motionless for a few moments, then rolled over: again he shrank from the touch of fangs, and by a great effort raised his head and looked down his leg. What he saw meant nothing to him for a moment, and then the meaning slowly dawned on him. A look of relief passed across his face, and he closed his eyes to rest a while before making any attempt to get to his horse. Anyhow, it would be safer after dark; and when darkness came he climbed into the saddle and, getting his bearings, turned his horse toward the SV ranch, hoping from what he had learned about it, that it could not be many miles away.

The crescent moon smiled down upon the rugged plain, across which a tired horse plodded, its rider roped to the saddle and fighting to keep his con-

sciousness; and shortly after dawn Johnny Nelson stared along the trail, and then, mounting hurriedly, raced to the inert body hanging from the saddle on a stumbling horse.

Three hours later Doc Reed closed the bedroom door behind him and lit a stogy. He smiled at his one-time enemy, and at his one-time enemy's wife.

"He'll come along aflyin'," he said. "Mostly loss of blood an' exhaustion. Th' wound only stunned him; ain't no signs of fracture. You'll be surprised how soon he'll be bustin' cayuses. Tough little devil, with a will like iron. Solid muscle, an' whalebone; stubborn as an ornery cow, an' *young!* That's th' thing, Johnny; youth! Lord, how it eats punishment!"

CHAPTER V

THE STRAY BOBCAT

BACK from their visit to the old Bar-20, Hopalong and Red turned from the main trail and followed a fainter path off to the right, which led several miles east of Gunsight and cut directly across Green Valley and the rich range of the SV ranch. Darkness fell as they neared the creek, and after crossing it they followed it for a mile and then struck northward up a little flanking valley. When they had ridden to the top of the last slope between them and the ranchhouse and saw its lights glowing in the darkness they grunted their pleasure.

"Looks good, Hoppy," said Red. "Looks good to see an old-time ranchhouse an' know there ain't no plows an' harrers layin' 'round. Glad to get back where there ain't no damned barbwire; an' I'm glad we got back before they went to bed. Th' Kid'll be plumb curious."

"We wasted near a month, foolin' 'round down there," said his companion. "Too bad we went a-tall. It'd be better to remember it like it was when we left to go to Montanny."

"Havin' seen th' hell them nesters has raised with th' old Bar-20 an' that whole section," growled Red, belligerently, "I reckon you still hold that th' dirt diggin' tribe is th' salvation of th' country!"

"I do; an' I ain't lovin' 'em no more'n you," retorted Hopalong. "I'm seein' things different, these days. In any new country it's th' farmer, th' man that spits on his hands an' sticks to one spot, that counts."

Red sneered but rode on, wordless and disgusted.

They took care of their mounts and pack animals, put the packs in the open blacksmith shed and ignored the dark and silent bunkhouse as they walked stiffly toward the lighted ranchhouse, where they knew their old friend Johnny Nelson and his family would give them a warm and sincere welcome.

Johnny met them at the kitchen door, closed it after them and followed them into the cozy living room, where an open fire cracked and hissed, and took the discomfort out of the damp, chilly night. Margaret, his wife, and her young brother Charley gave greeting which came from their hearts, and made room before the cheery blaze for the returning wanderers.

Johnny's eager questions about his old Bar-20 ranch where he had grown into manhood under the tutelage of these and other loyal friends, kept the newcomers busy, and as the easiest way out they gave a detailed account of their journey, for the moment excepting the unpleasant episode on the banks of Willow Creek. Time passed swiftly and at last the boy was driven off to bed. Not long after his disappearance Margaret said her good-nights and vanished.

The three men sat staring contentedly into the flickering fire, each in his thoughts living over days that would come no more, each quickened by memories which never would die.

"Had a little ruckus down on Willow, a few weeks back," said Hopalong, hoping to sketch it briefly. "Talked with a nester this side of th' crick—which reminds me that it was a good thing for all hands that we left th' old ranch when we did. We never would 'a' stood for nesters, an' we shore would 'a' got ourselves in th' outlaw class an' raised a lot of trouble that wouldn't 'a' done nobody no good. Th' farmers have come to stay." He sighed, and scowled at the fire.

"We'd 'a' made things right lively for 'em!" snapped Red.

"What was th' ruckus, Hoppy?" asked Johnny, his mind on the main trail.

"Oh, this nester told us about a robbery an' a murder, over at Johnsville. Rancher held up under th' noses of his men, by three gents. They split an' left town by different ways; but one of 'em called th' Ferret, a loco knife user, plumb butchered a woman that got in his way. Th' nester took me for th' sheriff. Said I was his twin brother. Red an' me rode on an' camped on th' bank of th' crick. I went in for a bath, which I needed, an' was paradin' plumb naked on th' bank for th' sun an' wind to dry me off, when somebody threw down on me from behind th' other bank. Creased me, an I fell into th' brush. Red come back right soon an' went after th' murderin' coyote. Fooled him with that hat trick an' let him lay where he found him. We put two an' two together an' figgered he was a feller called Mesquite Jenkins, one of th' Ferret's pardners, an' that he took me for th' sheriff, an' shot to clear his trail."

"Jumpy cuss, he was," said Red. "He was holed up in a pile of rocks that would 'a' made me trouble to get a shot at him; but he kicked a dead cactus down on his laigs an' th' spikes drove in deep an' made him jump so hard that I got a clean shot at his coyote head. I figger he reckoned it was a snake that struck him, an' lost his head."

Johnny chuckled. "Just can't keep out of trouble, can you? Better stick around here purty close, an' behave yoreselves. It ain't safe to turn you two loose—an' never was."

Hopalong grinned apologetically. "Gittin' too restless, Kid. I reckon I ain't th' kind that can settle down; not no more. Me an' Red aim to go back to Montanny on hossback, startin' right soon."

Johnny swore with deep feeling. "Near fifteen hundred miles of trouble. Yo're a pair of damn fools!"

"Makin' you restless, Kid?" asked Red, with shrewd insight.

"You mind yore own business!" snapped Johnny, who was indignantly repelling the sneaking thought that a married man was hobbled. He glanced at the door of his bedroom and lowered his voice. "I'm glad yo're back ag'in. I mebbe got to lick a man, an' in this case that'll shore mean gun-play for a wind-up. If anythin' happens to me I want Hoppy to stay down here an' run th' ranch in my place."

"But we're goin' north," objected Red, who heavily discounted anything so serious happening to his friend in an even break; and he would be on hand to see that it was an even break.

"We're not if Johnny needs me," rejoined Hopalong. "Yo're goin'; you got to go back to yore family."

He stared into the fire thoughtfully, and after a moment the ghost of a smile came to his face. It was a grim smile, but it was born in the very soul of Hopalong Cassidy, a soul accustomed to sacrifice, and a soul wearying of its earthly term. If Johnny had a chance to get into a fight with the unknown he would have to move rapidly, and early in the morning. Margaret was too fine a woman to become a widow. He turned his eyes on Johnny and quietly studied him, and he was not disappointed in what he saw. The Kid was as much a man as he ever had been.

"What's th' matter with you, Kid?" growled Red. "Married life makin' you soft?"

"Not soft; only thoughtful of them dependin' on me," retorted Johnny. "'Tain't no sign a man's losin' his grip just because he makes a will, is it? That's what my remark amounted to. I ain't losin' my grip, an' I'm just as hard an' fast an' steady as I ever was; but th' man I mebby got to lick is a human bobcat an' a fightin' dog rolled into one. You never saw such a youngster in all yore born days. He's hell on wheels, but without no fire. Know what I mean?"

Hopalong nodded, his eyes glowing. It was good to know that the old breed was showing in a new crop.

"Th' killer breed," he said, rubbing his chin. "I know 'em. Why you got to lick him?"

"'Tain't nothin' he's done," admitted Johnny. "'Tain't nothin' he's said. He ain't got nothin' ag'in' me, n' he likes Margaret as much as he can like

anybody. I took him off'n his cayuse after he'd fainted with exhaustion an' from loss of blood, an' Margaret nursed him like he was an angel from heaven instead of, mebby, a devil from hell. 'Tain't nothin' personal, an' there ain't no soreness. He does what he's told an' does it willin'. Top-hand cowpuncher—matter of fact, he's top-hand at everythin', damn th' luck!"

"Reckon mebby yo're getting cantankerous in yore old age," said Hopalong. "Most ranchers wouldn't fight ag'in' a man like that; they'd fight for him. Lord knows they're scarce enough, these days. Where'd he horn you?"

"You allus was lookin' for fights," reproved Red.

"My Gawd!" whispered Johnny, his mouth opening. "Lissen who's talkin'!"

"Where'd he horn you, Kid?" persisted Hopalong.

"Aw, he ain't horned me a-tall," confessed Johnny in a growl. "We get along real friendly, as friendly as I can get along with a cold-blooded cross between a bobcat an' a grizzly."

"Shore!" grunted Red. "Swaggerin' around with a chip on yore shoulder, an' blamin' him because he ain't blind! We *both* gotta stay down here. Yo're goin' loco!"

"Hoppy, I been doin' a lot of thinkin' about this here feller," said Johnny. "Strikes me he needs somebody to trail-herd him, without him knowin' he's bein' herded. He's at th' outer edge of th' herd. Couple more jumps an' he'll be in th' brakes th' worst damn outlaw this country ever seen. If he sticks to th' trail he'll make a good leader; but he'll never get up to th' killin' pen gate as beef."

"What's th' ruckus between you an' him?" asked Hopalong.

"I'm th' only one left," explained Johnny.

"That mebby has a meanin' to a man with brains," rejoined Hopalong; "but accordin' to all my friends I ain't got none. You'll have to come awful plain for me. Use little words an' speak slow."

"Make motions, too, Kid," chuckled Red. "He's as thick as Big Boggy mud."

"Which ain't thick!" retorted Hopalong.

"*Ain't* it?" snapped Red. "You remember that drive——"

"Aw, shut up!" said Hopalong. "Let him tell his story! Go on, Kid."

"Well, he's licked every man on th' ranch an' around Gunsight except my father-in-law an' me. Arnold is too old for him to lick, which leaves me holdin' th' well-known sack. It's got to come, because this hombre ain't used to run with no herd less'n he's th' champeen moss-head in it. He's only been real well an' strong these last two weeks. Before he was well an' strong he'd licked Jim Fanning. Took him an hour, an' he had to do most of his fightin' layin' down with Jim on top of him: but he licked Jim, just th' same. Since he's been feelin' real well he's licked nine different men. Never had to lick th' same man twice. Me, mebby because I kept him from dyin' or mebby because I'm boss 'round here, he ain't started on yet. Reckon mebby he's savin' me up for th' *big* rodeo."

"'Tain't a bad idear, at that," said Red, reminiscently. "There's quite some few wild men that would

'a' been a whole lot better off if they'd saved you up, an' kept on savin' you. Who is this here buck-jumpin' hell-bender?" Red was becoming earnest, tense, and enthusiastic, as if he yearned for much more intimate knowledge of Johnny's conquering hero. Red had felt that way many times in the past and it usually had been followed by cyclones and stampedes, both occurring simultaneously.

Johnny flashed him a glance and winked at Hopalong, who was smoothing out a knowing smile.

"Calls hisself Arizony Smith," answered the host. "Arizony bein' so big, an' Smith so numerous, it ain't exactly very enlightenin'."

"It don't tell us no less than any other handle would, anyhow," mused Hopalong. "He had to call hisself somethin'. I think he done real well."

"A funny thing happened when he opened his eyes in there," said Johnny, pointing to the room that his two friends had regarded as their own corral. "Margaret was fixin' his piller, an' I was standin' near th' bed, waitin' to be used for somethin'. He opened his eyes, looked straight at me, cool as ice, an' asks me if this was th' SV. When I nodded he gave a little sigh, snuggled down and went right back to sleep as happy as a kid on Christmas Eve." He looked at his two friends inquiringly. "How you read that sign?"

They discussed this matter without getting anywhere, and soon returned to the main theme.

"Why don't you fire him?" asked Red, wondering why no one had thought of this simple little thing before.

"I ain't firin' nobody till I has reason to," answered

Johnny. "This kid is a good cow-hand. There ain't nothin' smart Aleck, or sassy about him. He minds his own business, an' keeps his mouth shut, which ain't common among punchers in general when they lived on th' Bar-20. I had a place for him an' I put him to work. I was combin' out th' brush in th' north end, an' out beyond. While he behaves hisself, an' I got work for him, he'll stay."

"If he keeps his mouth shut an' minds his own business, like nobody ever knowed you to do on th' Bar-20," said Red, smarting a little, and frankly scratching his head, "how is it he's had to lick everybody in sight? This crowd ain't nasty, like some I could name."

"They ain't; but they like a little hoss-play, an' they laugh when they see somethin' they reckon is funny. Cimarron claims that that's one of his rights under th' Constitution of this United States."

"*These* United States," corrected Red, glancing up quickly.

"Since th' Civil War it's been *this* United States!" retorted Johnny, half rising.

"I said *these* United States," snapped Red, standing up.

"Th' Civil War's plumb over, even if it ain't forgot," said Hopalong, also getting up.

"It ain't goin' to be started ag'in in this house while I'm able to move. Sit *down*, Carrot-Top! Sit *down*, Kid!" A sudden inspiration made him grin. "We'll call it *the* United States, after which th' meetin' perceded without no bloodshed."

"Damn rebel!" growled Johnny.

"Black-lovin' carpet-bagger!" snorted Red.

"Shut up!" snapped Hopalong. "Go ahead, Kid."

"Where in hell was I?" demanded Johnny.

"Cimarron was claimin' Constitutional rights," prompted Hopalong.

"Oh. Well, you see, this Arizony Smith never was born to be no cow-puncher. Somethin' went plumb wrong som'ers. He ain't got no beard yet, but he shore aims to be right on hand when th' first hair shows. Every mornin' he lathers up, strops his razor, an' then shaves th' lather off ag'in. That was what got Sam Gardner licked, that shavin.' Sam asks him why he didn't set down an' wait a while after he'd fertilized th' crop, an' one word sorta led to another, which led to Sam gettin' licked."

"Gosh!" said Red, a far-away look in his eyes. "Don't that take you back a long time, Hoppy? Gosh!"

"Arizony's got a toothbrush," went on Johnny, grinning: "an' he uses it religious. That was where Arch's funeral lined up for th' start to Boot Hill. You see, Arch hadn't never seen a toothbrush, an'——"

"Hell he hadn't!" ejaculated Red, who should have known better.

"No moren' you did, till you got married!" retorted Johnny. "Don't go puttin' on no airs 'round here. We lived with you, an' ain't got over it yet."

"Yo're loco!" snorted Red, indignantly. "I saw a toothbrush long before that!"

"Where?" asked Hopalong, with deep interest.

"Kansas City; that's where!" exclaimed Red triumphantly. "Saw it in a drug store, under th' hill."

"How'd *you* know what it was?" demanded Johnny, alertly.

"There was a sign on it as *said* it was," retorted Red.

"You got a damn good mem'ry when you need it," rejoined Johnny.

"That so?" asked Red, his voice rising.

"Shut up!" snapped Hopalong. "Go on with th' story, Kid."

"I will if Red'll keep his mouth shut!"

"Aw, I didn't say nothin'," said Red.

"You never do," retorted Hopalong. "Go on, Kid."

"What you takin' *his* part for?" demanded Red, pugnaciously.

"Will you close that pie sump?" asked Hopalong, leaning forward.

"Shut up, Hoppy!" ordered Johnny.

"Well, of all th' ingrates!" retorted Hopalong indignantly.

"Shut up, an' let him tell th' story!" growled Red. "Yo're allus hornin' in."

Johnny nodded emphatically, and continued.

"Arch Wiggins shoved his head outa his shirt an' sees this Arizony curryin' his teeth like he had a bet on it. Arch sticks a hand up to his ear an' lissens. Not hearin' no music, he asks Smith if it's one of them new-fangled inside-th'-mouth jew's-harps. Arizony don't answer, seein' his face is full of brush. Then Arch asks him if he's a-scared he's caught some of them new teeth-ticks they're quarantinin' folks for back in Texas. Smith goes on with his rubbin', payin' no attention to th' laugh that's goin' 'round which encourages Arch a-

plenty. Arch knows he's nat'rally funny. He'll admit it any time. So he tried to think up somethin' still funnier. He ain't got no more sense than Red had at his age. When Smith wiped the brush off an' laid it over his bunk, Arch gets it an' bends down to polish his socks. Arizony walks over to him. He wasn't frownin', cussin' or sayin' a word; but if you ever saw a bobcat walkin' up to trouble, that was Arizony Smith. Arch didn't need no two guesses to know what was comin,' an' comin' right away, an' he squares off, hopin' for th' first crack. His hope was justified, because Arizony cracks him on th' nose an' then things got kinda blurred. Arch takes th' whole length of th' bunk-room to drop in, an' we all jumped to save th' lamps an' other breakables."

"Arch's a big, husky youngster," commented Red thoughtfully. "This Arizony must be a terrible weight for a hoss."

"Stands five foot seven an' weighs about one fifty. That's not so little; but if you figger it is, why there's nothin' big about dynamite except th' ruckus, an' th' hole."

"What about Cimarron's Constitutional rights?" asked Hopalong, grinning. He was beginning to take a deal of interest in the shrinking newcomer.

"Well," chuckled Johnny. "Arizony's like one of them there fashion pages in that magazine that comes to my wife, when th' damn thing comes a-tall. If there was ever a cow-punch dude, it's him: only he wears plumb quiet clothes. Reckon he wears a neckerchief for a month or two? Huh! *Clean* one, *every day!*

Yessir, so help me Gawd!" In his excitement he rose and paced the floor.

Red shook his head sorrowfully, thinking that conditions indeed were changing. The cow-punching business was being shot all to pieces.

"Cimarron had charge of combin' out th' brush, an' when he went on th' job Arizony was still in th' house here," continued Johnny, his feelings once more under control. "When he rides back it's in th' mornin', just as a couple of th' boys was leavin' th' bunkhouse. Arizony was th' first through th' door, an' he was all slicked up, like he was goin' to a mixed dance. When Cimarron saw our new puncher, he let out a whoop, chucked his sombrero on th' roof an' fell off his cayuse from laughin'. Arizony stops, leans ag'in' th' door casin', an' waits. Cimarron is sittin' up, cross-legged, tryin' to get hisself under control. Arizony sees his fix an' goes over to him—I tell you he is a bobcat! Cimarron raises a hand an' waves him back like he was brushin' off a fly; but Arizony pushes it aside an' slaps Cimarron acrost th' mouth.

"'That'll help you stop,' he says, steppin' back.

"It did; but it also helped him start. He left th' ground an' was goin' through th' air, all in one movement. Cimarron's gettin' along in years, but there ain't no moss on his temper, or actions. Arizony joins him before his feet come down, an' for a couple of minutes it looked like a pinwheel—an' there wasn't a single word said. Then it stopped sudden. Arizony looked like he'd been dropped in front of a stampede, but Cimarron looked like th' battle of Gettysburg——"

"What's th' matter with Bull Run?" snapped Red.

"Cimarron jerked his gun, but was lookin' into Arizony's, an' he lets it drop. Hoppy, I wish you could 'a' seen that draw! It's th' first one I ever saw that reminded me of you!"

The increase in Red's interest made him lean forward.

"Was th' kid excited?" asked Hopalong, his eyes gleaming.

"No more'n if somebody's asked him to pass th' beans."

"Hum. Must be purty good for a youngster. Know anythin' more about him?"

Johnny shook his head.

"Well, all right," said Hopalong. "I got an idear hatchin': reckon I'll sleep on it. Where's Arnold?" he asked, referring to Johnny's father-in-law.

"Over to Dave's with th' boys. Arizony's with 'em."

"Everybody friends ag'in?" asked Red.

"He licked 'em fair an' he ain't no bully. They know how to take him now. Why shouldn't they be friends?"

Hopalong pulled out a huge nickel watch and glanced from it to the clock.

"Thought you was goin' to reg'late that clock?"

"Will, some day; it only gains ten, fifteen minutes a day."

"Come on, Red," sighed Hopalong in weary resignation. "I'm half asleep right now."

"I'm aimin' to play a game with th' Kid," demurred Red.

Hopalong stopped and turned. "You two never play checkers without endin' in a fight!" he retorted. "You come along: I tell you I want to *sleep!*"

CHAPTER VI

THE BOBCAT PAUSES

HOPALONG was up at daylight and got busy in the kitchen, from which soon came the odours of coffee and cooking food. He stepped into the living room and beat the dishpan with a potato masher, which got swift reactions. Arnold poked his head out of his room and tried to glare through sleep-gummed eyes, finally made out the identity of the disturber, grinned even while he swore and disappeared, pleading a total lack of appetite.

"How's th' head this bright sunny mornin'?" called Hopalong. Had he obeyed the reply he forthwith would have taken a long, one-way journey through a dry and super-heated land.

"What's th' matter?" growled Johnny from the door of his room.

"Grub's ready; come an' get it."

"That all? Thought mebby Red was stalkin' Injuns in his well known, quiet way," retorted Johnny. "Ain't you got no sense, a-tall you——?" he did not finish because the wife of his bosom hauled him back into the room and stepped out fresh and smiling.

"Bless you, Hopalong," she laughed. "I don't know what I'd do without you. You've spoiled me." She looked at the clock. "What time is it?"

Hopalong also looked at the clock and then at his watch and told her. His glance passed on and rested for an instant on the whisky bottle on the other end of the shelf.

Margaret glanced at the bottle, and at her father's door, her rising eyebrows asking a question. Hopalong looked stupid, and then smiled suddenly.

"Oh, no; sober as a judge. He's only sleepy." Evidently he had a poor opinion of judges. He chuckled inwardly: Arnold would have to do without the hair of the dog that bit him.

Breakfast over without casualties, Hopalong and Red followed Johnny toward the bunkhouse, idling along and falling a little behind. Johnny was about to step through the doorway when Wood Hallock turned a backward flip through it, did a head spin and then flopped. After him came Arizona Smith, graceful as a snake and springy as a cat. He was an impressive study in dynamics, a potential explosion, and there came a wondering look on Hopalong's face; the old breed was, indeed, being repeated in the new crop. Red's mouth snapped shut and his hand dropped to his gun. This was the snake he had left for dead, down south of Willow Creek!

Wood Hallock showed no intention of resuming hostilities, and the springy youngster turned nonchalantly to view the newcomers. As his gaze picked out Hopalong his hand disappeared in thin air and was again seen with a Colt in it. From Hopalong's hip spurted a gray-white cloud of smoke and the youngster's gun spun through a short, high arc in the air. Before it could

touch the ground its owner had caught it with his left hand only to lose it again as another smoke cloud burst from Hopalong's hip.

Red started forward, but found Hopalong's rigid arm across his chest; Johnny's lightning-like draw was wasted, for Hopalong's voice cracked like a whip.

"Keep outa this, *both* of you!" He looked at the crouched, defiant youth, who seemed about to launch himself against the ready, deadly gun. "What bit you, Kid?" he asked quietly.

Arizona's gaze did not waver, and in his eyes there was a look that thrilled Hopalong and sent a cold shiver up his back.

"What you pickin' on me for?" asked Hopalong.

Arizona did not answer, too tensely waiting for the moment to launch himself against this persistent enemy.

Reading the determination, but still ignorant of the reason for it, Hopalong slipped the Colt back into its holster and waited, his gaze steady, ominous and a little contemptuous. He sensed the slow change in the other, and bent his will into his stare. Arizona's eyes did not waver, but defeat was tacitly admitted by words.

"Serves me right for missin' you on Willow!" he whispered, red lights flaring up far back in his eyes.

"Reckon so," said Hopalong calmly, casually.

"You won't take me back alive!" whispered the youngster, quivering.

"Ain't aimin' to try to," replied Hopalong.

"Then what you trailin' me so damned hard for?"

"Don't get stuck on yoreself, Kid. I ain't trailin' you, an' never was. If I was I'd 'a' caught you long before this. Pick up that gun an' go to work." He turned to Johnny. "Reckon Dave might like a two-hand game, less'n you an Red want to cut in." He turned his back on Arizona and walked calmly toward the corral, his hands thrust carelessly in his trouser pockets.

Arizona, rigid in his half crouch, quivered again, slowly turning his head to look after the man who had beaten him with hand and eye. That shooting had been past belief. He took half a step forward.

"Why don't you want me now?" he asked.

Hopalong replied over his shoulder without slowing.

"Why th' hell should I? I never saw you before."

Disbelief flared in Arizona's eyes followed by a look of doubt.

"I—I got th' Ferret for you!"

Hopalong took off his sombrero and gently scratched the livid scar showing through his thin hair. Arizona stiffened again, glanced at the Colt on the ground and then relaxed.

"Kid, there's somethin' wrong. Who do you reckon I am, anyhow?"

"A bigger man than I figgered you, sheriff."

"Sheriff?" growled Hopalong, as if he were puzzled. "Sheriff? You loco?"

Suspicion sent the youth back into the half crouch.

"Ain't you?" he muttered.

Johnny laughed suddenly, boisterously.

"Kid, you've give yore hand away without needin'

to! He ain't no sheriff: he's Hopalong Cassidy! I been wonderin' why you allus looked around th' range, first thing every mornin'. Here, lemme interduce you: Hoppy, this is Arizona Smith. He's a top-hand, an' a fightin' fool."

"More like a fightin' wonder," replied Hopalong, "if what I've heard is true."

The youth slowly picked up the Colt, absently blew the sand from it and let it slip into the holster, automatically telling himself to clean it thoroughly as soon as he could get the chance. He looked at Hopalong standing carelessly watching him, and then walked slowly forward, his eyes alight.

"I've rid near five hundred miles to find you, Hopalong. I'm—I'm glad I did." His eyes raised to the prominent scar. "An' I wouldn't 'a' shot you for all th' money on earth." He slumped a bit, but caught himself. He was surprised to find himself saying: "You reckon I better go back an' give myself up?"

Hopalong looked closely at him for a moment, saw that the youth meant it, and shook his head almost imperceptibly. He was looking deep into the cold eyes and found in them a latent, withheld warmth, a furtive frightened warmth, as if Mesquite Jenkins ached to give his friendship and yet feared to. Hopalong had seen the same thing in a cross between dog and wolf, the battle between the dog's love for man, its loyalty and its need for human companionship arrayed on one side against the wild, suspicious and man-fearing strain of the other. Looking through the staring eyes he found the plane of reflection, where

thoughts were mirrored in their true nature. And what he saw warmed him and reawakened his persistent feeling of loss. William, Junior, had been taken from him; but here was a youth who might, in time, fill that void.

Mesquite stood like a man in a trance, utterly lost and somehow glad of it. Something beyond him, against his will, was driving him to surrender to this man, who was the idol of his childish dreams, his splendid companion in his land of make-believe. For years he had worshiped this master gun-man from afar; for years the splendid world of his imagination had revolved about Hopalong Cassidy—and now! He was almost frightened.

Hopalong was speaking to him and the soft, grave voice filled him with a strange, warm elation.

"So you got th' feller that butchered that woman, Mesquite? Spend any of that ranchman's money yet?"

There could be but one reason for that question and Mesquite felt an exquisite pride as he answered it.

"No, sir." He glanced at the livid, accusing scar and could not take his eyes from it. A look almost of pain swept across his face. "I'm sorry I—done *that*, Hopalong."

Hopalong stroked the scar and frowned. "I ain't findin' no fault with *what* you did," he growled, his memory flashing that scene before him; "it was th' *way* you done it." He turned abruptly and strode toward the corral, Red following him. Mesquite watched them catch and saddle their horses and ride off

along the Gunsight trail without giving him a single backward glance.

The two friends covered a mile in silence, then Red spoke, his indignation overcoming his feeling of hopeless wonderment.

"Gettin' tired of life, Hoppy?" he demanded, his voice edged with sullen anger.

"Don't reckon I'm half as tired of it now as I have been," answered his thoughtful and smiling friend.

"You missed yore chance!" retorted Red. "That damned wolverine will get you, shore!"

"Cussed if you ain't named him for me, Red!" exclaimed his friend. "Heedless courage, an' damn what happens! That's Mesquite. That kid don't know what fear is, an' shore as hell he'll walk right straight to his death. There's good stuff in him, an' we've got to train him so his ignorant bravery won't kill him off. I'm taking him with us, Carrot-Top. We'll learn him all we know. If he's got th' right stuff in him he'll go straight; if he ain't he'll never reach Montanny. What you say? Shall we turn th' worst killer this country ever saw into a good citizen, or let him go to hell his own way?"

Red pictured his old friend's restless wanderings, the dull hopelessness that was eating into him like cancer. He had feelings come to him that he could not put into words, or even thoughts. A sidewise glance into Hopalong's eager, hungry eyes swept all thought of self from his mind, and he clapped his friend on the shoulder, ashamed of his show of sentiment before the motion was completed.

"We'll give him a chance, Hoppy, if you wants."

"Yes, give him a chance an' let him work things out for hisself. If he's worth a damn he'll work 'em out; if he ain't, then he can slide. He's got more guts than any youngster I've seen in years."

Back on the ranch Mesquite had watched the two riders until he no longer could see them, and then he turned slowly and looked at Johnny, his lips quivering.

"I allus heard he was a big man, Nelson," he said haltingly; "but he's a damn sight bigger'n I ever figgered. My dad saw him twelve years ago, an' ever since then I've been practicin' to be like him. Then I stole an' then *shot him!*" he whispered.

Johnny smiled. "Hell, he's used to that. He don't bear you no grudge. I know, because I've lived with him since before I was yore age. He taught me everythin' I know Mesquite, ever stick anybody up before?"

Mesquite's eyes glinted, the red lights dancing far back.

"I reckon that's my affair, Nelson," he said coldly.

"If you feel that way, it is," retorted Johnny, also coldly. "I was just wonderin' if I oughta tell you to stick around th' ranch till Hoppy leaves. He's aimin' to ride hossback up to Montanny, him an' Red; an' he takes funny notions, sometimes."

Mesquite's face looked like a sunrise and he gulped, but the lights in his eyes still danced.

"I'd give ten years of my life to go with him; but if he takes me it'll be on his judgment, an' not yourn. What'll I do to-day?"

"Go down an' help Cimarron. He's settin' some new posts around th' quicksand."

Johnny watched the youngster catch and saddle a horse, mount it and ride away, not knowing that Mesquite had gone through the whole operation by sheer force of habit, his mind flying ahead over a long, twisting and wonderful trail; not knowing that the youth was trembling with eagerness as he felt that a childish dream was on the verge of coming true.

Margaret's song crept through the SV foreman's preoccupation and he turned toward the house as a smile came over his face.

Margaret looked up and her face wrinkled with pleasure.

"What makes you smile like that, Johnny? It makes you look like a little boy. You should do it more often."

He told her of the incidents of the morning, and what he suspected might happen; and he understood the moisture in her eyes when he had finished.

"Oh, Johnny-Boy!" she whispered. "What a splendid thing it would be for both of them! To put careless youth on the true trail and mark it plain for him; to lighten the gloom and bring back illusions to a weary traveller who has found his own hard trail already far too long." Tears rolled unheeded down her cheeks. "They need each other, those two; the young man no more than the old."

He took her in his arms and patted her shoulder.

"It was enough to make anybody smile like a kid, wasn't it?" He gently cleared his throat. "It didn't

take Hoppy's loss to make me know how much you mean to me; but it did make me sorta want to hold you tighter."

"You silly boy," she chided, smiling through her tears. "You get right out of this kitchen. Just look at the work I've got ahead of me!"

"Copyin' Hoppy ever since he was a little feller! Cripes!" marvelled the husband of Margaret Nelson, slowly obeying his wife.

CHAPTER VII

THE ODDS SHIFT

HOPALONG CASSIDY reached the top of the ridge, quickly selected his course down the slope and across the little valley, and rode leisurely downward, his eyes on a narrow path which angled up the side of the next slope. Behind him came two pack horses, docile and trail-broken, and following them rode Red Connors and Mesquite Jenkins. The immediate objective of the little cavalcade was the Cimarron River; the mediate, the town of Dodge, on the Arkansas; and their remote destination was Buck Peter's ranch in Montana.

They had been roughly following an old caravan route the last few days, without knowing it, for all traces had long since been wiped out. The country had been growing wilder and rougher, and difficulties had been experienced in getting through and out of the cañon of the Canadian. The beauty of this part of the river had aroused their admiration, but they had been glad to get away from its castellated cliffs, its remarkable terraces and other wonders of erosion. For some days they had been crossing a sizable expanse of high and rolling sand hills, but now were getting into a country of firmer soil, of pleasant ravines, thick scrub, timbered slopes, and of voracious gnats and mosquitoes.

"We're across th' divide, anyhow," growled Red. "Can't be very much further to th' Cimarron. Mebby we've saved time on this short cut, an' mebby we ain't. Hoppy allus was hell bent to cut across an' git into some kind of a mess. We could just as well kept on goin' north, hit th' Old Dry Route Trail, an' had a mite of comfort; but that wouldn't 'a' been accordin' to Hoppy's nature. If you stick to him, Kid, you'll learn all th' worst parts of th' country, an' cussed few of th' good." He rubbed the stubby growth on his chin. "Deserts is his *worst* failin'. A desert draws him like a dogie draws ticks."

Mesquite smiled. "I'm enjoyin' every mile," he said.

Red smiled reminiscently. "Reckon so. I did, too, at yore age. Just so you can enjoy it a lot more, lemme tell you this section shore was tough at one time. Startin' away over east, at th' divide of th' Concho an' Colorado Rivers, an' runnin' west into th' hills, was th' worst rustler section anywhere along th' Old Trail. Hardly a herd got past th' Colorado bottoms without losin' cattle. Stampedes was th' usual things, but they got so bold that they'd throw a herd up for a cut, trimmin' out every hoof but them with th' herd's road brand on 'em. Th' trail bosses raised so much fuss about it that th' rangers had to come up. By that time some of th' thieves was so well stocked that they pushed further west, stoppin' out this way. What buffalo was left come down here in this rough country, an' th' hunters follered 'em. They easy took to skinnin' cattle. Even now there's herds goin' up th' Old Western Trail on government contract, or to

stock new ranges in th' Northwest. A rustler is a mean coyote, but a skinner is worse'n a snake."

Mesquite growled sullenly. "I was born years too late. Everythin's calmed down now, an' a feller ain't got a chance no more for real excitement."

"Listen here, Kid," replied Red, grinning from ear to ear. "If yo're lookin' for excitement, you shore done a wise thing when you roped onto that locoed red-head yonder. Look at him! He's found a path, an' if he follers it, I'll take three to one that we'll have excitement inside of forty-eight hours."

They left the slope and started across the bottom of the little valley, and suddenly Red spoke and raised his arm.

"Look there, Kid," he said, pointing to a woods which crowded down to the little, dried-up creek bed. "See that lane through them trees? See it, all choked with scrub and second growth? There's th' record of some old-time settler, or wagon train. I think there was one from Van Buren came out this way. They had to clear their own road, worry about water an' grass, losin' animals to th' Injuns, gettin' lost an' bustin' down. If they come from Van Buren an' was headin' for Santa Fe, they turned north too soon. Still, they could hit th' Old Dry Route on th' south bank of th' Cimarron."

They followed the plodding pack animals along the narrow path which ran diagonally up the other slope, and nearly bumped into them at an abrupt turn around a projecting clay bank. Hopalong was sitting quietly in his saddle, his gaze on a wagon road which crossed

the path from southeast to northwest. At the approach of his companions he looked up and frowned.

"Here's one of th' toughest sections in th' country," he told them. "Here's a waggin road crossin' this path," he grumbled.

"Now, ain't that wonderful!" replied Red, with scorching irony. "Kid, just think of *that!* A waggin road crossin' a *path!* I never saw th' likes before!" He glared at his red-haired friend. "Ain't you never seen a waggin road crossin' a path before, you chump? Come on—get movin', before th' path crosses th' waggin road."

Hopalong grunted something, rode along the path, and in a moment the little cavalcade was jogging on in its regular order.

Red roused himself out of a reverie and glanced at his youthful companion.

"Kid, I'll take *two* to one that we have excitement in *twenty-four* hours. He's gettin' hisself plumb suspicious an' all set for trouble. If he don't find none waitin' for us, he'll act so cussed suspicious an' ornery, that he'll make it. Lemme see yore rifle. Hoppy's filled you plumb full of six-gun talk, an' it's time *I* had a show. With him discoverin' waggin roads crossin' paths, water flowin' down hill, an' trees with leaves on 'em, it's time we get ready for a ruckus."

Mesquite came out of the enthralling grip of his mental picturing of the long journey ahead of them, of the things to be seen, the adventures to come to him in the company of these two men. Outwardly he was calm and cold; inwardly, hotly eager and exultant.

He turned to his companion, ironing out the smile on his face. Hopalong he had accepted with a blind and impelling trust, with an instinctive friendliness he never had felt for any other man; he had yielded to the older man's dominance without a reservation, but he had yielded proudly. They had looked into each other's eyes, measured each other with the searching, canny shrewdness of two duelists, and found a complete and wordless understanding. Although Mesquite had not yet integrated his vague feelings for Hopalong into a chain of thought, he would, if need be, lay down his life for the other.

With Red Connors it was different. He had accepted Red, so far, as he would have accepted any vouched for friend of the other man—tacitly, automatically, casually, without any real interest; as he would have accepted Hopalong's favourite horse or dog. Red would have to justify any deeper and warmer interest before he stood apart and was accepted for his own merits.

Mesquite drew the weapon from the saddle scabbard and passed it over in silence and without interest. Red took it, smiled, and started a monologue which the youth found full of meat.

"It's th' good old gun that's made a lot of his'try," said Red, talking to himself. He recognized the other's aloofness and would make no direct overtures. "If it ain't been spoiled by neglect, it oughta group 'em close, in the right hands. Hoppy don't think much of these guns. He wants one that'll shoot to th' moon. That .45-120 Sharps of hisn is good for near two thous-

sand, which is a whole lot farther'n a man can see to shoot at any target that has to be shot at. Out in this country a man ain't shootin' at houses at two thousand; but most generally at somethin' that's shootin' at him. Eight hundred's a plenty, though I have stretched it to a thousand."

Mesquite's eyes blazed. It was purely reflex and not a sign of anger, even if it was caused by the memory of three shots that Red had fired at the longer range. One of them had fanned Mesquite's ear, the second had lifted his sombrero from his head, and the third had grooved the top of his shoulder. Combined, they had driven him to cover, where Red's fourth shot, a snap shot, fired at close range, had temporarily bereft the youth of consciousness. After that experience the fact that the youngster had tolerated Red at all had been one of the things that had assured Hopalong of the soundness and breadth and fairness of Mesquite's character. The youth had been big enough to realize that Red's pursuit and shooting had been justified by the facts, and that he and not Red had been to blame for the whole affair.

"I got funny idears about rear sights," continued Red, his eyes on the subject of his discourse. "I see these are scratched, an' I'm reckonin' they're marked for every hundred yards. Anyhow, I see eight scratches farther an' farther apart. Over eight hundred you've got to guess, which you'd have to do, anyhow. I also reckon that you figger th' range, set th' sight, an' shoot. That right?"

"At everythin' over three hundred," answered Mes-

quite, his interest becoming warmer. Something told him that this man was worth listening to.

"Uh-huh," grunted Red thoughtfully. "That's farther than I figgered. I used to mark for my elevations, too. Had to, for years. Then as I got older an' more experienced, I found myself savin' a lot of time where time was cussed valuable. When you've got to throw up, sight an' squeeze at some cuss jumpin' from one cover to another, there ain't no time to set down an' figger th' range, size up th' windage, set th' sights, get a bead an' plug him. By th' time you've got things figgered, he's got his cover, an' his lead's singin' in yore ears. Long as you can hear th' singing' yo're all right; but there's goin' to come a time when you don't hear it; that's where yore friends start tellin' each other what a good cuss you was."

"You mean you took off yore elevatin' slide?" asked Mesquite.

"Nope. I just don't make no more scratches. I got her set for a hundred. Above that I don't turn th' range into yards, but into th' slope of th' barrel. It's th' same thing, only it's a short cut; an' it shore saves valuable time. Every six-gun hip-shot does th' same thing: he shoots by *feel*. He don't have to figger no more. That's me, nowadays, with th' rifle."

"But you got yore elevatin' wedge, just th' same," said Mesquite.

"Shore. Say, I'm shootin' over th' same range. I fire th' first shot by feel, an' then set th' sights accordin'ly for th' rest of th' shots. There's plenty of fellers that can shoot at a mark over even ranges that

ain't shiftin' between shots, an' tie me on th' score; but scatter th' targets around th' plain, helter-skelter, make 'em shoot as fast as they can, an' I'll give 'em three to one, an' make money. Some fellers are nat'ral born shots, an' some never amount to nothin'."

Mesquite was thoughtfully turning over what he had heard, and his respect for his companion was slowly growing. He glanced at the rifle.

"Why don't they sight that gun for longer ranges?" he asked. "It'll shoot a lot farther."

"Shore will," admitted Red. "Kill a lot farther, too; but after a certain distance th' bullet loses speed right fast. Th' faster it travels th' less it's bothered by wind an' th' pull of th' earth. It ain't twirlin' so fast, neither, an' begins to wabble. Purty soon it'll start goin' end over end, an' give you keyholes on th' target. When that time comes sights ain't much good."

"How you figger windage?" asked Mesquite.

"Same as I figger range. You get to feel it. First shot I'm sightin' by feel for range an' windage both. I know how far off th' dead center I'm holdin'. After that I set th' sight for elevation over th' same distance, an' hold th' same as th' first shot for windage. That's habit, an' it's easy. Mirage'll make a fool outta a man time after time. So'll slant. Take a good shot that's been livin' on th' flats for years an' put him in mountain country. Nine times outa ten he'll be one mad *hombre* an' cuss th' gun fit to bust. Lemme tell you somethin' before I forget it. If you've got a clean barrel for yore first shot, an' make a centre, you want to hold a mite higher as she fouls, for a clean barrel shoots high.

By th' time we get to Montanny you'll be shootin' by feel, an' shootin' close. It's worth learnin'."

He grinned. "There ain't nothin' mysterious about good shootin'. It's common sense, a good eye an' a steady hand. If yore hand ain't steady, then you got to learn to shoot with a movin' gun; you got to squeeze yore trigger as you move onto th' target, for th' longer you hold th' more you'll wabble. An' don't you never get too stuck up an' proud to use a rest if it's right handy. Th' other feller will use one, an' mebby walk off leavin' you for th' buzzards. Mesquite, we're all goin' to have a bang-up good time this trip."

The path widening, Hopalong let the pack animals pass him and dropped back to ride with his friends.

"Hoppy," said Red, grimacing, "if I ever meet up with Cimarron Quantrell ag'in I'm aimin' to peg out his hide on th' bunk house wall. He's done me a mean trick, an' I gotta suffer all th' rest of my days just because he didn't have good sense."

"I'm admirin' yore gall for pickin' on anybody for *that* reason," retorted Hopalong. "Good sense is somethin' you oughta keep plumb quiet about. What you got ag'in' Cimarron?"

"That stinkin' pipe he gave you," replied Red. "I ain't got what you might call a weak stummick, but every time I get a whiff of that corncob it near turns over. Cigarettes was good enough for you for years an' years; an' now you've gone an' took up a pipe! You don't suppose Cimarron would 'a' give you that pipe if he could 'a' smoked it any more hisself, do you?"

"Huh!" grunted Hopalong, removing the corncob to look at it with admiring and affectionate eyes. "Cigarettes only make you want to smoke more of 'em, an' you don't get no satisfaction from 'em at all."

"Took you a long time to find that out," interposed Red.

"Take a pipe, now," continued his friend; "you got somethin' satisfyin' there. When you empty her once you can put her away for a while." He grinned happily. "I'm gettin' so I can smoke this feller before breakfast."

"You don't have to tell me that," retorted Red. "*That's* one of th' things I'm goin' to lick Cimarron for. When I woke up th' first mornin', in that little room of Johnny's, I come near goin' through the winder. You oughta learn to love th' solitudes, Hoppy; learn to go off by yoreself, down wind, when you feel like smokin'. Tell you one thing: that stinker will get us all into trouble before we hit Montanny."

"Mebby," grunted the proud owner of the corncob. He spat out a gratuitous contribution of the grapevine stem, made a face and scraped his tongue on his teeth. "What was you doin' back there? Fillin' th' Kid's ears with a lot of stuff about that Winchester of yourn?" He turned to Mesquite. "Kid, there's only one *rifle* in this crowd: that's mine. That carrot-top knows it, too. He's been glad enough to borrow it when things looked awful bad."

"Shore," sneered Red. "Borrowed it to scare 'em. Nobody ever made a clean hit with it."

"Kid," said Hopalong, "you don't want to swaller

everythin' he's told you. Just because he can do it ain't sayin' you can. He's no good, but I got to admit he's hell on wheels with a rifle. Born that way, an' it ain't no credit to him: he can't help bein' a cockeyed wonder with that forty-five-seventy of hisn. He can do things with my Sharps, too, that are shore past understandin'. Just th' same, don't you swap cayuses till you get on th' other bank."

"Shucks!" grunted Red. "He can allus go back to his own way, can't he?" He thought a moment. "Got anythin' to say ag'in' Johnny's shootin'? You bet you ain't! Who showed *him* how?"

"Just th' same th' Kid oughta use a Sharps, like mine."

"Huh! He don't want to shoot across th' whole country. If he can make hits at seven, eight hundred yards, shootin' reasonable rapid, he'll be good enough for most company. Why, to make a hit at two thousand means he's got to shoot plumb into th' very centre of th' mark at two hundred: th' very, dead centre. If he's off centre an inch at two hundred, he'll be off ten inches at two thousand, not countin' what th' wind, th' earth's pull, an' mirage will do to it. Th' Winchester is lighter, shorter, an' easier handled every way, besides bein' a repeater."

"Repeater!" snorted Hopalong. "No repeater is as close shootin' as a single shot!"

"I ain't gettin' in no fool arguments about that," rejoined Red. "We ain't talkin' about splittin' bullets on an ax edge, or drivin' nails—but at that *I'll* split more bullets an' drive more nails with my gun than

you'll do with yourn. We're talkin' about things he'll have to look out for. My idear of a sensible mark is th' upper half of a man's head, stickin' up over a rock. Accordin' to you, Mesquite ought to have set triggers, a telescope on th' barrel, an' pack a surveyin' instrument. Accordin' to me all he needs is his own gun, plenty of practice with it, an' a reversin' front sight that'll show a white bead for poor light, an' a gold bead to stand out in good light ag'in' any kind of target. When you talk about a Colt I'll set back an' listen; but when you shoot off yore mouth about rifles I'll ride you to a frazzle. What little you know about 'em you got from me."

"Nobody never got nothin' from you that was worth anythin'," retorted Hopalong, emptying his corncob and putting it in his pocket. "Th' reason Johnny's a good rifle shot is because he was born one. You did yore best to spoil him, but even *you* couldn't do that. An' Johnny uses a Sharps, like mine!"

A grouchy silence ensued, to be broken at last by Mesquite.

"When are we comin' to some place where there's an express office?" he asked, his hand straying to a fat bulge in his trouser pocket, where reposed more than thirteen hundred dollars of another man's money. This was the fruit of his first holdup, his first wide step off the right trail; and it burned into his very soul. To purge himself of the benefits of that evil act was the thought uppermost in his mind. His companions knew that he had the money, knew how he had obtained it; but beyond one casual inquiry by Hopalong

the matter had not been referred to. Hopalong had known better than to tell the youth to return it to its rightful owner, for that would have been no test. If Mesquite was to travel the straight trail he would have to take the initiative in this matter; after he had done that he would find his two companions ready to help him go through with almost any play.

Hopalong caught the unconscious movement of his companion's hand, but made no sign that he had. He knew what was in the youngster's mind and the knowledge pleased him.

"There's one up at Dodge," Hopalong answered casually.

"But Dodge is a long way off," demurred Mesquite, frowning.

"Good thing it is, too, Kid," replied Hopalong. "Dodge is a tough town if you go out to see th' sights, despite its marshals. It is unless it's changed a hull lot since I was there last. You got a few things to learn before yo're ready to get turned loose in *that* town—an' I'm glad Ogalalla is still farther away. One of th' things is to learn to hide yore thoughts when you start for yore gun. You can draw as quick as me, but that'll only get you killed unless you learn to quit tellin' about it with yore eyes. Th' other thing is a little closer shootin' from th' hip. Yo're gettin' better an' better all th' time, an' you'll mebby be all right for Dodge by th' time we get there. Ogalalla is a different proposition. Ever see a blackboard, Kid?"

"Shore," answered Mesquite, wonderingly.

"Then you get so you can see one of 'em right in

front of yore eyes when you start for yore Colt. If you want to let anybody know that yo're feelin' like makin' a draw, tell 'em with yore mouth; but don't say nothin'at all with yore eyes."

These three had been together for days, and mile after mile had found them becoming more and more friendly, found their respect for each other slowly growing. Daily Mesquite had practiced with his Colt under the eyes of a master of that weapon, and now Red Connors was warming up to him enough to take an interest in his use of the longer weapon. By the time the Arkansas River was reached it looked as though Mesquite would be fitted to take care of himself in any society.

Only one thing bothered Mesquite, and that was a matter of conscience and restitution. His hand more and more often sought his bulging trouser pockets; and as they drew nearer and nearer to the town where he would be able to find reliable facilities for the return of that money, his eagerness and impatience grew. If he could get rid of it before either of his companions hinted at it; if he could do it as a purely voluntary act, he would feel that he was nearly square with the world, himself and his two new friends.

CHAPTER VIII

IDLE CURIOSITY

WITHIN a mile they sighted a collection of miserable shacks and dilapidated corrals. There were two old-time sod dugouts, a clapboard shanty and three log huts. The sod dugouts suggested that they had been built in Indian days, when they would have been veritable fortresses. This was in keeping with the second growth timber in the old wagon road through the woods.

Riding down the hillside, Hopalong sniffed sharply, glanced about and then looked straight ahead. In the door of a log house appeared a slovenly, listless woman, her features sharp, her skin wrinkled and yellow. Two buck teeth showed against her lower lip, and above the upper was a trace of a mustache.

She watched them with a frank suspicion and quiet hostility, frowned when they dismounted close by and acted as though they were going to stop for the night.

"Whut you-all reckonin' to do?" she called.

"Howdy, ma'am," replied Hopalong, pausing with his hand on a pack rope. "Countin' on spendin' th' night. Any place you can put us up?"

"They ain't no place fer you-all to put up," she retorted with sharp emphasis. "Keep on goin' to th' Smithers' place. They'll fix ye till mornin'."

"An' where's that?" asked Red.

"Couple hours along that path."

"Too far," grunted Hopalong. He glanced at the clapboard shed with its hand split shingles and located the odour he had first caught on the hill. "Reckon we'll camp out some'rs close by, if there's water."

"Th' crick's wet," replied the woman. "Thar's grass fer yer hosses an' water fer yerselves. It's nigh a mile down th' path."

"Any chance to buy a meal?" asked Red, itching to get a look into the cabin.

"Nothin' but corn pone, bacon an' black strap," answered the woman. She stepped back and slowly closed the door to a crack. "'Twon't do you-all no good to hang round hyar. We-all air suspicious o' strangers since we lost two hosses to th' last uns. Ye better go on to Smithers."

A razorback hog rounded the corner of the building and poked its snout into the crack of the door, which widened, swallowed the hog and then slammed shut. They heard the defiant sound of a bar falling into place, and saw a ragged blanket covering a window move a little.

Hopalong coiled the free end of the pack rope, made it fast again, and swung into his saddle. As they went slowly on they saw an old, hand-made freight wagon with the wide track of the standard southern gauge. Its spokes were loose, cracked, wired and nailed together; its felloes were warped and weather-split, and its tires eaten with rust. Under it half a dozen chickens wallowed in the dust, keeping a lookout for razorbacks,

while in the scrub beyond it several of the hogs rooted energetically and kept an eye on the chickens. The yard was littered with trash, and a half-barrel of fat and wood ashes told of soft soap in the making. The whole place was an epic of shiftlessness and dilapidation. One spot in the yard caught their eyes. It was an oval covered with a layer of bark dust, but to Hopalong it was more than that.

Passing the last habitation, a sod dugout with a rusty powder keg serving as a chimney, and its earth roof littered with cast-off articles of many kinds, they caught a glimpse of a face peering out at them through the dirty pane of a home-made sash. It was old, senile, vicious and somewhat vacant; crossed and criss-crossed with dirt-filled lines, the eyes watery and the toothless mouth drooling with tobacco juice.

"Arkansas squatters," grunted Hopalong as they cleared the collection of buildings and headed for the rambling path along the bottom of the hill, where it caught all the surface water of the slope in time of rain and became a miry ditch. "That old feller must 'a' come in years ago, cuttin' that road through th' woods back yonder. Bet that old wagon was th' one he used. I'm glad they ain't welcomin' strangers: no tellin' what we'd pick up in one of them shacks."

"Wonder how they make a livin'?" mused Mesquite after puzzling over this matter by himself. He answered his own question. "Raise hogs for meat, corn for corn pone, an' pack in th' 'lasses. They must be about one step ahead of starvation half th' time."

Hopalong laughed. "They skin cattle an' sell what

hides they dast, an' make leather outa th' rest, after cuttin' out th' brands. Didn't you smell th' skins in th' shanty, an' see th' bark dust on th' ground?"

"An' th' corn they raise makes their moonshine," said Red. "If we went pokin' round these hills we'd likely find th' still; an' mebby stolen cattle in some of th' little valleys. There'll be lye vats, too, for th' tannin'. They ain't so awful far from th' Old Western Trail, an' a sight of cattle has been lost on it between th' Red River an' th' Cimarron. There's a lot of cut-off trails, too, over east."

They gained the path and followed it through the brush, several times being faced by defiant and half-wild razorbacks, mean fighters when roused. Reaching the little creek, they quickly made camp and put side-line hobbles on their animals. Mesquite glanced around the rocky creek bank, looking for snake signs, but was put at ease by Hopalong.

"No use worryin' about snakes, Kid, with all them hogs runnin' free," said the leader. He glanced quickly at the top of the bank and saw a tusked razorback peering at him through its vicious little eyes. "We'll picket our animals to-night," he remarked. "They're well fed enough to stand a limited grazing. Them hogs may stampede 'em, an' make us a pile of trouble."

"I'll watch 'em," volunteered Mesquite.

"Won't have to," replied Hopalong. "We'll be sleepin' with one eye open, with all these cussed hogs around us. They're cunnin' as wild animals, bold as domestics, an' they'll eat anythin', not leavin' out

humans. If I wasn't so stubborn we'd go on to that Smithers' place; but nobody's goin' to drive me like I was a cow."

"We'll build our fire on th' top of th' bank, where there's some breeze," suggested Red, climbing up the rocky slope with a bucket of water in his hand.

The light of their fire, as darkness descended, served as a rallying point for the roaming razorbacks. They squealed and grunted, pushed and fought in the surrounding brush, their little eyes gleaming with reflected light in a circle around the camp. Occasionally one bolder than the rest would jump out into view, stare for a moment, and then, wheeling like a flash, dash back again.

While Hopalong cooked the supper, Red and Mesquite rustled firewood and built up a great pile of it to keep the fire blazing high through the night. Red found himself bothered several times by hogs, but kept his temper and tactfully avoided arousing them. With Mesquite, however, it was different. The youth, bending down in the twilight gloom under some trees, picked up a dead branch and found himself suddenly confronted by a foul-smelling snout and beady eyes gleaming with anger. He kicked the hog and then brought the limb down across its back as it whirled to face him again. Its squeal was more of surprise than injury, and for a moment it seemed to hesitate on the verge of attack.

"You can start as soon as you've a mind to," growled Mesquite, his gun feeling good to his hand. "G'wan! *Vamose!*" and he dashed at it, growling horribly. The

hog wheeled in a panic and crashed through the brush, stirring up others in its flight. Mesquite carried the limb into camp and cut it into sections with the hand ax.

"Bad thing to notice 'em," reproved Hopalong. "Above all, don't let 'em think yo're scared. We want to sleep on th' ground to-night, an' not up in th' trees."

"Make good targets," grunted Mesquite.

"Be like shootin' a man's cattle on th' range," replied Hopalong. "These all belong to them squatters back yonder."

After they had rolled up in their blankets, Mesquite lay awake, his mind too active to let him sleep. Beyond a tentative sortie or two directed at the supplies, the hogs did not bother them, their curiosity apparently having been appeased, and as Mesquite's interest in them waned, his thoughts turned to what Red had said about this section of the country, and the remarks made about the squatters back in the clearing. Here was adventure close at hand, fairly shouting to him. Here was cattle-skinning, moonshining, rustling, all within a short radius of the blazing camp fire. His imagination became fired and he rolled restlessly in his blanket. His two companions might be content to sleep away this opportunity, but he was not. He watched them closely and decided that they slept soundly, but to test this he rose and added wood to the fire. They gave no signs of being disturbed. On all sides he heard the hogs moving through the brush, grunting, pattering, sniffing, snorting. With a final look around he slipped beyond the circle of firelight and struck down the bank for the alluring path and what it might lead him to.

Hopalong stirred and sat up, feeling for his boots.

"What's th' matter?" asked Red without moving.

"Oh, th' Kid's gone off to poke his nose in things that ain't none of his business," growled his companion.

"If that's a crime, you'd 'a' been in jail ever since you could walk," retorted Red. "Let him alone. Quit ridin' herd on him."

"Ought to," grunted Hopalong. He drew on his boots and rose, throwing his belts around him.

"What you figger on doin'?" demanded his friend, showing more interest.

"I'm goin' after him an' pry him out of trouble. These squatters act quick."

Red chuckled as he sat up and felt for his own boots. "Can't help puttin' yore nose in 'longside his, can you?"

Hopalong glared. "Where *you* goin'?"

"To pry *you* out," chuckled Red.

"You've got to stay here an' keep these hogs from eatin' everythin' we own," retorted his friend, and grinned happily as Red squirmed. "Water th' cayuses first thing an' shift th' picket pins. By th' time you've got breakfast ready we'll be here to help you eat it. So-long."

Red's remarks concerning hogs, of two kinds, cheered his departing friend, who crossed the path and started to move along parallel with it, having been born with a suspicion for the obvious method of procedure. Ahead of him a twig snapped, and he paused to consider it. Mesquite should be farther along than that.

Mesquite *was* farther along. He had left the path

and followed a hog track through the brush up a hillside, figuring that if there was a still in the vicinity there would be sour mash and a hog track leading to it. It crossed two ravines and two more little divides, and then thinned out in front of a deadfall. He stopped and regarded the ground, barely to be seen in the moonlight under the trees. If he followed every hog path he came across, he might spend the night and get nowhere. Still, this one had been worn deep and looked to be a thoroughfare. Cogitating about it, he passed around the deadfall as silently as possible. Behind him, moving like a shadow, came a lean, lank squatter, an old buffalo gun thrown forward under an arm.

Mesquite caught the odour of wood smoke, and cast around to locate its origin. What wind there was came from across this little ravine, and he worked carefully down to the bottom. Here he lost the odour, but found cattle tracks in the sandy bed of the dried-up creek. They led to his right, and with a final sniff he abandoned his search for the still and followed the tracks. Behind him on the top of the divide the lank squatter nodded grimly and muttered.

"Ain't revenooers, an' ain't rangers. That's what I told 'em, too. Sneakin' punchers lookin' for that last bunch. Told 'em to let them critters alone! Fust we was drove off th' Pawnee, then off th' Chisholm, *then* off th' Old Western, an' *now* we're in fer bein' chased agin!" His face wrinkled with anger and he hurried on along the ridge, the deliberate clicking of the cocked hammer startling him out of his annoying

conjectures. "Thar I go agin, cockin' careless! Oh, well—she'll make more noise 'n that when she bites!"

Mesquite was pushing on rapidly and followed the tracks into a branching ravine which sloped sharply up to the top of another ridge. Crossing this, he worked down the other side and again caught the odour of a wood fire. He hesitated which to track down, but his training had been that of a cowman, and he pushed on along the cattle tracks. Behind him sounded the clear call of a bird, ending in a beautiful trill. He stepped aside, over a few rocks and crouched behind them, waiting, as another bird cheeped and twittered sleepily. Minutes passed and brought him reassurance, and he went on again.

The ravine narrowed swiftly into a slight gorge-like passage between the rock walls, and after listening a moment he cautiously entered it. There came a swift and indistinct movement, streaks of fire flashed before his eyes, and then blackness enveloped him. Two shadowy figures worked deftly over him, and he was carried up the northern ridge, from whence a bird cheeped three times. Mesquite's pursuer let down the hammer of the Sharps, spat copiously, and grunted, wheeling to go back and watch the other punchers at their blazing camp fire.

Hopalong crossed the deep hog path and kept on toward the buildings. They were dark and silent, but as he moved around the clearing he thought he caught a pin point of light coming through the chinking of one of the log huts. He moved his head back and forth

to catch it again, but failed. A sudden movement of hogs in the brush on the other side of the clearing made him crouch to wait for whatever had disturbed them. After a moment a tall, gangling figure emerged from the trees and walked swiftly across the clearing toward the log house which had caught Hopalong's attention. A wood pile extended back from the rear of the hut and the brush grew out to this. Hopalong dropped to all fours and crept along the scanty cover, reached the house, and lay down in the shadow of the wall, his ear against the foundation log.

The voices inside were muffled and indistinct, and he could catch only an occasional word, but what he did catch acquainted him with the gravity of the present situation. He pieced together the information that he and his companions had been watched and followed up to the houses that afternoon and then on to their camp. The watchers had about decided that the three strangers were innocent of hostile intentions when Mesquite had left the camp and set suspicious minds afire.

Within the hut the argument seemed to grow hotter over a discussion of their status, whether they were revenue officers, rangers, or scouting cowmen. Hopalong grinned at this tempest over a mere definition of terms, for any one of the three would mean about the same, practically, to these squatters. But there was a difference, and it came to him like a flash: Rangers were quick to avenge the murder of one of their force, and would keep on the trail, no matter where it led to, or how much time passed; revenue agents also would

seek vengeance, but perhaps not so persistently; cowmen might disappear without starting in motion such well organized machinery or such a long and persistent arm.

Quick steps sounded at the north end of the clearing, and another squatter hurried to the log house, his Sharps slung comfortably under his arm. A door creaked and closed, and a new burst of conversation ensued, one of more interest, judging by the exciting raising of the voices. He could hear better now, and what he heard made him curse in his throat and wriggle backward. Mesquite was taken, and now formed the subject of a discussion about how to get rid of him.

Hopalong reached the trees and waited, knowing only one certain way to locate the captured youth. That was to wait and follow the last man seen, in case that individual returned to Mesquite's captors with instructions. He wormed his way toward the lower end of the clearing, wondering if he could backtrack the squatter; and then had the uncomfortable feeling of being followed. He slipped aside and crouched behind a tree stump, and after a few moments heard a chuckle behind him and swung a Colt in its direction.

"Quit that!" snapped a low voice. "Ain't you got no sense?"

Hopalong's reply was a heartfelt curse at his friend's stupidity.

Red moved into sight, his Winchester balanced across a forearm.

"Lookin' for th' Kid?" he calmly asked.

"What did I tell you about them hogs?" snapped Hopalong.

"Nothin' that was worth nothin'," replied his friend. "I put everythin' in th' trees, except th' cayuses. Did you know they was watchin' th' camp?"

"Th' cayuses?"

"Naw; these cussed squatters!" snorted Red.

"Reckoned so, but I couldn't make shore."

"I reckoned so, an' I *am* shore," replied Red cheerfully. "I run plumb into him. I had to let th' fire burn down before I started. Bunch of them hogs rushed clean acrost th' camp, an' I did my damn'dest to keep up with 'em. Knees all skinned, an' my hands, too. Yep; he was watchin'."

"What you do with him?"

"Knocked him on th' head, saddled yore cayuse, an' tied him to th' saddle. If I'd left him on th' ground, them hogs would 'a' ate him, mebby."

"Of all th' red headed fools," growled Hopalong, lost in admiration for his bosom friend. "I notice you picked *my* cayuse!"

"That's th' advantage of bein' on th' ground," chuckled Red, and then became curious. "What you aimin' to do now?"

"Find th' Kid, get him away, and clear out of th' country. You got any valuable suggestions?"

"Nope; just waitin' to begin."

Hopalong decided that he would try to backtrack the last squatter he had seen, and he gripped his companion's arm. He spoke hurriedly and to the point, and Red grumbled as he moved away with the best speed commensurate with a reasonable silence. When he stopped he had worked around the clearing and was

facing the door of the interesting log house. He turned his front sight until the white bead faced him, knelt down behind a stump, and waited hopefully for the cabin door to open. This assignment was pie compared to some that he had been given.

Hopalong had found the path used by the last squatter and now went rapidly along it, the heel prints of the other's boots plain where the moonlight filtered through. The man had been running and the prints were deep. The path kept away from skylines except where it had been strictly necessary to cross a ridge, and followed the ravines wherever possible. At last Hopalong caught the smell of burning wood and a little later the suggestion of sour mash. He slowed and left the path where it crossed a sandy creek bed, in which were the prints of cattle, and the tracks of a man. Ahead lay a rocky narrows wrapped in shadow.

Hopalong froze against the side of the ravine, considering the situation and suspiciously eyeing the narrow pass. He shook his head and started up the bank on hands and knees, and as he gained the summit of the divide he heard the clicking of horns. The smell of sour mash was no longer discernible, but there came a stronger odour of wood smoke. He stared intently into the black shadows under a steep face of the ridge and as he watched the place a thin stream of sparks licked upward.

"Feedin' that fire will make trouble for you skunks," he muttered, and began a cautious and angling descent. A faint shot sounded in the west, and then a small burst of them. "Reckon if it comes to a show-down I

can offer to swap half a dozen prisoners for th' Kid," he chuckled, serenely confident of Red's ability to keep that cabin door tightly shut.

A bird twittered just in front of him. There was a strained silence and then he caught sight of a black and formless bulk dropping down upon him. Writhing aside he escaped the impact and before the other could make a hostile move, Hopalong's gun butt struck solidly against his head. The assailant relaxed without a sound, and Hopalong, taking the man's weapons and hurling them into the brush, crept on again toward the hillside hut, soon catching the low murmur of disputing voices, which served him for a guide. The inmates of the hut were making so much noise in their dispute that they did not hear the faint and intermittent firing in the west, a sound partly subdued by the intervening hills.

Reaching the door of the hut Hopalong found that it opened outward. He listened for a moment and put his eye against a crack in the wall. Five men wrangled inside, and Mesquite, bound but not now gagged, was raging at them, defiant in spite of all threats, and cursing them for taking his money. Drawing both guns, Hopalong jerked open the door, covered the crowd and gave a curt order.

"Hands up, an' let th' lantern alone!" he snapped. "Mesquite, hop over here!"

His orders were obeyed to the letter, and he slid one gun into its holster as he felt for his pocket knife, which he opened by the aid of his teeth, and with it slashed the cords from the youth's wrists. He drew the second

gun again while Mesquite freed himself from the ankle ropes, took his own Colt from a bench near the wall and then rocked on the balls of his feet in a rage.

"They got that money!" he snarled. "Got *that* money!"

"You get their weapons first!" ordered Hopalong, and barked a command to the group.

They sullenly turned their faces to the wall and allowed Mesquite to take their guns. He went along the line again, recovering his money from the two men who had taken it from him. This was the money which was to be a measure of his honesty and self-respect, and he counted it carefully three times, and then snarled a threat at the two who had relieved him of it. Hopalong, in view of the ticklish situation, had to exert the full power of his will to keep the enraged youth from turning the cabin into a dog pit. At last prevailing, he ordered Mesquite to clear the shanty of all weapons, and when this had been done, the two punchers backed outside, slammed shut the door and fastened it by propping two logs against it.

"This way, Kid!" grunted Hopalong, starting at a run along the path. They followed the hog track which Mesquite had used earlier in the night, came to the narrow trail and raced to the camp. Hopalong grinned at Red's prisoner, roped to the saddle of the picketed horse, who alternately cursed and tried to shout through the wadded gag. In a few moments the man was bound to a tree, the pack horses loaded and the two punchers led and drove them back toward the collection of houses, where Red Connors should be glad to see them.

If Red was glad he disguised his feelings well.

"Where you been all this time?" he sharply demanded of Hopalong. "That door's all shot to pieces an' it'll fall in soon! Been holed up some'rs, asleep?"

"Watch th' cayuses, Kid," Hopalong told Mesquite and, ignoring Red's show of temper, slipped through the brush toward the rickety corral, where he turned loose three horses and drove them from the clearing. Having thus interfered with pursuit, he hurried back to his old-time bosom friend.

"Be daylight in three, four hours," he remarked. "Kid, you drive th' pack hosses back th' way we come till you get to where th' waggin road crosses th' path. That's th' place Red shot off his mouth so much. Take th' road an' travel fast. If you come to a right-hand path or road, foller it, an' keep on goin'. When you've got a good start with th' pack hosses me an' Red 'll close up th' show here an' foller you. *Vamoose!*"

"I don't want to leave you fellers holdin' down nothin' like this," growled Mesquite, "while I go gallivantin' over th' country. You an' Red take th' pack animals an' let me do th' follerin'. Th' whole damn thing's *my* fault, anyhow!"

"Git a goin'!" snapped Hopalong, and the youth regretfully obeyed.

At the sound of the departing horses the cabin door opened experimentally, but promptly slammed shut again, a heartfelt curse accompanying the movement. Red pumped another cartridge into the barrel of the Winchester and grinned.

"Got 'em eatin' out of my hand," he remarked.

"Keep 'em eatin'," replied Hopalong. "I'm leadin' our cayuses off a ways, so them coyotes won't hear us leave when we get ready to go."

"Good idear," commented Red. "Be a better idear if you stay with 'em. No tellin' who might get loose, an' if we're left afoot around here, hell shore will pop. Most of these fellers are goin' to be sore."

Time passed and then Red heard Hopalong's signal. He had made the door slam shut twice since Hopalong had led off the horses, and now he slipped back from the stump, then turned and ran at top speed as a gun cracked from the far side of the clearing. A burst of voices was heard, shouting orders, most of them contradictory and very profane, and more shots clipped twigs on both sides of the running Red. He gained the horses, leaped into his saddle and followed his friend along the path at top speed, Mesquite's trail seen at intervals in the moonlight. They overtook the youth on the bank of a creek, and Hopalong led the way down its middle to lose their trail.

It was noon and their fire burned brightly and with a minimum of smoke. In the distance to the north there was a long gap in the hills which told them where the Cimarron lay.

Mesquite finished relating his part of the night's activities and waited for a reprimand, his eyes on Hopalong.

"Shucks!" growled that person. "We was handicapped. We didn't have no real cause to loosen in earnest at them fellers, because we didn't have no right stirrin' 'em that way. Th' main thing is this: If you

feel like pokin' yore nose in things, be shore you've got a good reason for it, an' then go through with it; if you ain't got no good reason, then shut yore eyes an' mind yore own business."

Red snorted in whole-souled derision. "My Gawd! Listen who's preachin'!" and his comments upon his bosom friend's nature and history started an argument which Mesquite thoroughly enjoyed.

CHAPTER IX

DODGE

HOPALONG and his companions drew rein on top of the little divide south of Mulberry Creek, from where they caught sight of the glistening sandhills of the Arkansas River to the northwest, and saw the tenuous smudge of smoke behind them, where a train passed along the river branch of the railroad on the old trail. Below them ran the little creek, and just off it grazed a herd, spread out placidly to crop the grass which once again was plentiful. Across the creek the broad cattle trail ran up the gentle slope and dipped from sight, to reappear at intervals as it swung around to gain the ford just west of the settlement on the river.

The town could not be seen from the ridge, but the riders thrilled a little. They were on famous ground, near a famous town, although it was not as old as the youngest of the three.

Not far from them was the intersection of two great trails, the older running east and west, along which once had flowed a mighty stream of commerce. It had been shortened daily by the railroad during the construction of the latter, for the terminals of the old trail had been brought closer together with every rail that was laid. Horses and mules had plodded along this

prairie track, loaded with heavy packs; great wagons had rolled along it, each with teams of mules or spans of oxen; emigrant wagons had crawled along in the high-flung dust of this great highway to build up the West, and to build it well; sun-bleached stage coaches, swaying on their "through braces," had rolled along it behind their running teams, bouncing and careening from one station to the next, ofttimes with exultant red warriors racing in pursuit. The railroad had ended them all.

The other trail ran north and south and had been made by another kind of migration. No wheels had turned along its wearying miles except those of the "chuck wagons." It had been beaten into and through the prairie sod by thousands of hoofs, the hoofs of cattle on the drive. Texas steers had rattled their long horns from the Gulf coast across the open prairies and into the rioting towns at the end of tracks, or past them into the rugged valleys of Wyoming, Montana, and the Dakotas.

The crossing of these two trails was a point to give pause to an American familiar with the development of the great West, to give pause to him to do silent homage to this unique and historic spot.

The little creek was a famous stopping place for the great herds which at one time had followed one another closely up the Western trail. Along it in their time thousands of cattle had rested here while their outfits sent squads on to the town at the river. Near here the capricious Arkansas flowed over its sandy, shifting bed, one day a torrent and the next day an excuse.

At a point a little above the town was a famous ford, while below was the first bridge on the old trail.

Hopalong stirred out of his reverie and turned to his right-hand companion. The eyes of both had been fixed on four men riding south along that wide, beaten road. They had crossed the little bottoms, pushed through the fringe of timber skirting the creek, forded the shallow stream and dismounted at the chuck wagon, loudly telling of their experiences, boasting of their deeds and passing brief warnings of this saloon or that dance hall to four other men, who had swung into their saddles and paused impatiently, eager to go and to see for themselves.

"Like old times, Red," chuckled Hopalong.

"Not quite so crowded hereabouts," replied Red Connors, glancing at the single herd.

One of the men down at the wagon shouted a warning to the departing squad. "Look out for th' marshal!" he yelled, adding a string of epithets. His detailed account was lost to the three on the hill and ignored by the four crossing the creek.

"Same old warnin', Red," said Hopalong, smiling, "at th' same old place." He started the pack horses on again and followed them down the slope, reached the chuck wagon and stopped for a few words with the loafing men.

"Goin' on to Dodge?" asked a red-whiskered puncher, whose one good eye was bloodshot from too much liquor and too little sleep.

"Yeah," answered Hopalong. "Has it changed much?"

"Oh, 'tain't as noisy an' bullyin' as it wunst was; but it's near as mean. They do things quieter now, but they do 'em just th' same. Look out for Sam Perkins, th' marshal. He's a bad *hombre*, an' he's got some bad *hombres* fer deppeties."

"Shouldn't wonder," replied Hopalong, grinning reminiscently. There could be no doubt, now, that they were nearing Dodge. "He's got some high an' mighty reputations to live up to. Bein' marshal of Dodge allus was a man's job."

"Yo're shoutin' gospel, stranger," said another of the outfit. "This feller Perkins is plumb bad. You want to look out fer him."

"I hear he stands in with Hotchkiss," said the first puncher. "That's th' last dance hall down th' main street. Th' marshal don't bother it, but lets it rampage high an' wide."

"Is it still th' fashion to hang up yore guns at th' first place you hit?" inquired Hopalong.

"Reckon so, but everybody don't do it," growled the red-whiskered man. "Folks in town totes their irons under their armpits. Stranger ain't got much show if he hangs hisn up. I'm totin' mine, hereafter, all th' time I'm **there.**"

"Then it might be a good thing to stay away," suggested Hopalong, quickly reviewing, in his mind, the imposing list of Dodge's marshals, most of whom showed a marked partiality for shotguns loaded with buckshot. This was a most distressing combination, lacking dignity, poetry, and even the remotest suggestion of glamour. It was so outrageously practical and cold blooded.

Nine buckshot to a barrel, and two barrels bored to scatter efficiently—judged from gunman standards it was most unethical. The very thought of such a double-barreled rejoinder to a man's best argument made one careful and reluctant; it cramped the activities of a gunman, filled his mind with forebodings and made him uncomfortable and constrained. Hopalong grinned again. "You better stay here with th' wagon," he said.

"Huh!" retorted the red-whiskered puncher.

After a few more words Hopalong and his friends sent their pack animals on again and followed them leisurely along the wide trail toward town. They were silent, each man buried in his thoughts, but soon Red shifted in his saddle.

"Last time I was in Dodge it was so bad it fair hurt," he said.

Hopalong nodded. "It's bad, an' it allus will be bad durin' our day," he replied; "but it'll change, just like this old trail."

Dodge was bad, undoubtedly; but it would have been much worse if it were not for the men who had kept its peace year after year. To them had been assigned the task of holding in reasonable check the riffraff of tough customers drawn from the plains, the trails and the construction camps of the railroad. In its earlier days buffalo hunters, in greasy, nondescript but picturesque garb, had stalked its streets, their heavy Sharps rifles under their arms, their holster guns and skinning knives convenient to their hands. In the heyday of their hunting and skinning operations they

often made a hundred dollars from sun to sun, and spent it from dark to dawn. There had been rough laborers from the roadbed, noisy, quarrelsome, made bestial by the crude but effective frontier whisky. They had stamped and roared in the dance halls, saloons and gambling houses, and swaggered down the street looking for trouble, which usually met them halfway.

Grim lipped, close lidded, bow legged riders from the limitless ranges, yielding to the opportunity here provided to work off accumulations of high pressure steam acquired through hot, dusty and wearying miles, and the recurrent monotony of their occupation, here had found one word sufficient provocation to start a fight. There had been, and most likely were at this day, questionable women, tin horn gamblers, freighter's Indians, half-breeds, squawmen and fugitives from the pressing justice of the East.

Here the gamut of life had been revealed to one observant glance. Here life had surged at high pressure, and mild characteristics had been swamped under the riotous surge of superlatives. There had been no tints in the colouration of Dodge, but stark, primary colours; there had been no softness, nothing delicate, tenuous or subtle; but only harshness, coarseness and stridency. All the lusts had been there, bald, apparent, seething, flaming crimson; men had gambled, with their imminent poverty plainly in view, eager as hyenas scenting a kill, everything they owned at stake, and already planning to recoup possible losses in devious ways which shunned the light; they had fought with the savageness of wild beasts, expecting no mercy if they lost; they had

drunk without restraint, with insensibility as their ultimate check; they had wooed and won, or lost, like animals, scornful of giving heed to the openness of their courting.

These had been the units of the town's population, of its sweating, swearing, carousing crowds, a turbulent caldron of the baser human emotions, a vat whose potentiality had been held within certain limits by a remarkable breed of fighting peace officers; these had been the units from which the future had to draw on for the building of its edifice of civilization, the humus from which must spring law and order, a security for person and property, a conception of abstract right, and sober, serious thoughts of man's immortality and his high place in the scale of living things.

Dodge was bad, but not as bad as it once had been, and its improvement had grown as the caliber of its fearless marshals had shrunk, for this change, so slow but so sure, may be laid to many things. The population had shifted as the environment changed, as the rails stretched farther and farther westward; as the many great herds bound up the trail had thinned, or been diverted to other shipping points, and came at more infrequent intervals; the restless riffraff of humanity had moved on to other towns. The buffalo had been wiped out with a swift expediency, and reckless, criminal slaughter which is to our shame, and the hunters came no more. In their place for a short interval appeared the bone pilgrims, whose wagons scoured the prairies and hauled the countless thousands of buffalo bones to the nearest railroad, there to

be shipped to fertilizer factories in the East. Some of these were old hunters, paying through the degradation of such scavenging the price of their wanton slaughter; others were ne'er-do-wells, one step above begging.

The worst characters had been driven out of the town, or had been killed off, eventually faster than new ones came in; settlers had turned the sod and served notice that they had come to stay. Great herds of definite and large value grazed on the buffalo grass of the surrounding prairies, and represented an investment peculiarly adapted to theft; and this weakness of easy spoliation had aroused in the cattle outfits a certain grimness and directness of behaviour which discouraged the peculiar abilities of the town's earlier inhabitants. Easy living had become too hazardous in the vicinity of Dodge, and the motley crowd had migrated to safer fields.

All these factors had changed the town, whose history in the essentials was not much different from that of other towns along the cattle trails and the growing railroads, and Dodge had felt them one by one. But there had been one influence which had worked steadily, doggedly, although with bloody loss and desperation, at times losing its foothold and for the moment going down, but ever arising and at last triumphant.

The list of Dodge's marshals stood out, in the main, like a flashing beacon on a treacherous and rock-fouled coast; and the roster was a roll of honour. They had outroughed the rough, outshot the shooters; they had come and gone in turn, and in turn their places had been taken. Quiet, grim, observing; masters of their chosen

weapons, readers of human nature; swift in their judgments, their condemnations and their straightforward answers to duty, they had braved the motley pack of human wolves and cleared the way with lead. By the sheer force of their daring and their personality they had ridden out the storm; but the threatening ground swell persistently lingered and still rose and fell uneasily.

CHAPTER X

TRAIL DUST

THE street hummed with life, flowing from the fading radiance of one lighted window into and through the glow of the next. Freighters from the minor and feeding trails drove their great wagons down the middle of the street, eager to gain the corrals or stables and be done with the day's work. Most often these wagons were coupled in pairs, one behind the other, and drawn by a dozen pairs of mules, which made it easier, by uncoupling, to draw them one by one over treacherous places in the roads. Half-breeds and Indians, Mexicans, Americans, and men of other nationalities, made up a motley crew which wove its restless and devious way through the deep dust, pausing momentarily before garishly lighted doors, through which came dance hall music, the click of chips, the monotonous chant of the croupier and the harsh sound of massed and maudlin conversations. There were stage drivers, stage messengers, cowboys, soldiers on leave from the near-by post, station keepers, wranglers, gamblers, travelers and the inevitable drifters, drifting lower. There is one thing, among possible others, which can be said in favour of this collection of humans: it was frank and had small use for hypocrisy. A man

stood on his two feet, upon whatever plane he had chosen, and made no apologies.

Hopalong and his friends stopped at the first hotel, looming one story higher than its flanking stables and sheds, threw a sop to their thirsts at the bar and left their guns with its attendants, and then strolled into the office, where brief formalities were gone through and rooms assigned to them. Too late for supper in the hotel dining room, they wandered down the street and found an all night restaurant where their needs were quickly and crudely supplied. Not being finicky, they were easily satisfied.

Emerging, they looked up and down the street and because of their penchant for acting foolishly, made straight for the building they had been warned against. This proved to be a large and noisy dance hall, gambling house and saloon, all under one roof, and without hesitation they pushed into it, pleasantly stimulated by the imminence of possible dangers.

Stragglers drifted slowly along the bar and among the tables, drinking, exchanging words here and there, and placed their bets on their favourite games, forming a slowly shifting and slowly augmenting stream. An extra bartender took up his position behind the counter and soon was busy. The human stream began to flow more purposefully and presently the fringes around the roulette, faro, and monte tables in the rear room became solid lines and hid the games from sight. Being on a cattle trail, and in a cattle grazing country, the monte tables claimed the most devotees. An altercation in one corner of the big, outer room died down sul-

lenly as another across from it flared up and became a fight, swift, short, high pulsing and brutal. There seemed to be an assurance of non-interference from the guardians of the public peace, which nothing short of some scandalous occurrence would alter. Being on the outmost fringe of the town it might have been a matter of wisdom on the part of the peace officials not to disturb this placé, and by forbearance to let the wilder elements gravitate to this one spot and keep the rest of the town more or less tranquil. The noise of many voices lowered the pitch of the total and from the street must have sounded like an angry surf breaking on a distant beach.

Mesquite Jenkins paused just inside the front door and watched the crowd with an eager interest. Dodge was the biggest town he had ever been in and this was the biggest crowd he had ever seen under one roof. As he watched the throng there came a crashing chord from a tinny piano across the room and the crowd eddied and pushed back from it, to clear a small platform. Mesquite, almost oblivious to the presence of his two companions, turned to the stairs at his side, which ran up to a gallery going entirely around the main room, and went up a few steps to look over the throng, his two companions following him.

A flurry of colour at a door in the rear caught his eye, and he watched a bobbing mass of curly red hair move tortuously toward the platform. He craned his neck and followed the progress of the red head until she reached the platform and became a dancing girl, beautiful in his eyes at that distance. He felt himself stir

strangely, and strange feelings possessed him. He became restless and very much alive, and gave his unaccountable elation a passing thought. He had taken nothing but soft drinks and could not account for such a stimulation.

"Well, Kid?" inquired Hopalong, smiling at the youth's keen interest and strained attitude. "This ain't so bad for a change, huh?"

"No good for a steady diet, though," said the blasé Red, frowning.

He yawned and regarded the scene with bored attention. The only value it had to him was its possibilities for trouble and excitement, and the pleasure of this expectation was greatly marred by the absence of his valuable gun. He silently cursed the arrangement which allowed such a place to run full blast, and made a visiting stranger hang up his life preserver. The hand on his empty holster dropped to his side.

Hopalong flashed him a sidewise glance and chuckled.

"These empty sheaths *do* feel sorta uncomfortable," he suggested. "A feller's got to be carful not to go on th' prod."

"'Tain't no fit place for a moss head, that's shore," growled Red sullenly. "An' I can see plenty of dust up th' trail. We better throw off it, wide, or some stampedin' bunch will mix up with us an' make a lot of trouble."

"This ain't no dry drive, Carrot-Top," retorted Hopalong. "There won't be no thirsty cattle stampedin' back to th' last water."

"In this herd it's th' thirsty cattle that behaves

themselves," retorted Red. "Th' more drink they have th' worst they get." He turned to Mesquite. "What you think about this bunch of scourin's, Kid?"

Mesquite grunted an incomprehensible answer, his gaze not leaving the bobbing head of the girl. Even through the deep tan of his cheeks a flush showed, and his eyes glowed with a swiftly growing admiration.

Hopalong glanced at the dancer, back at Mesquite and then at Red, and he smiled knowingly. Red nodded and went down the steps, his two companions close behind him and all feeling uncomfortable because of the lack of weight on their thighs. They felt that they were in the same class with three muleys in a herd of longhorns, but with this difference: while they sensed their lack of defensive weapons their spirits were in no way abashed thereby. Muleys slip out of the herd and show a preference to bed down by themselves, but these three shorn individuals were going "bumming" in spite of thoughts of trouble.

Mesquite scorned the bar, turned his back on his two friends and pushed boldly into the crowd, heading straight for the platform, careless of whose feet he stepped on. He had a cocky disregard for the feelings of others which in itself was a warning to those sober enough to read it, and at this hour the great majority were sober.

Red put down his glass and turned his back to the bar, trying to look over the intervening heads in an effort to locate the youth. Failing in this he instinctively hitched up his belt, was momentarily surprised

by its lightness, and then hooked an elbow on the counter and grinned at his suddenly thoughtful companion.

"Th' Kid's enjoyin' this, Hoppy," Red chuckled, unconsciously joining the crowd in stamping in time to the music. The atmosphere would have been thick enough from the close packed bodies and the tobacco smoke lying in thick and eddying strata from wall to wall, but it was made much worse by the dust which rose from under the pounding of many boots.

"Yeah," grunted Hopalong, his faint scowl becoming more pronounced. "I don't want to ride herd on him, an' spoil his fun—an' with humans, like cows, if you herd 'em *too* close they'll go on th' prod an' you can't do nothin' with 'em. I wouldn't even think of herdin' him close if he was up ag'in' men; but a woman is a new kind of animal to him. Oh, well," he sighed; "I'm glad of one thing: he don't like likker, an' that'll help us some."

"Don't you dast ride herd on him!" replied Red, indignantly. "Let him alone. He's got to learn to look out for himself in any crowd, an' he won't learn if yo're nosin' him all th' time, like a cow with her first calf. He can take care of himself. You make me sick!"

"Mebby he can," growled his companion in obvious disbelief; "but I've knowed men three times his age an' ten times his experience that made fools outa themselves over uglier wimmen than *that* one. Sorry we got to town too late to get that stick-up money off to th' man it belongs to. He's got it in his pocket, an' I ain't hornin' in to remind him of it, even now. Reckon I'll have a close look at her. See you later."

Red glanced around in indecision as his companion became swallowed by the crowd, got a flash of two bartender's heads moving swiftly apart, and caught a look in their eyes which made him suspect that they had overheard Hopalong's remarks about the Kid's money. Red rolled a cigarette and wandered idly toward the door, hesitated on the threshold as his unburdened thigh again made itself known, and then stepped into the street.

A moment later he reëntered the building by the other door and began a tactful but persistent effort to get near the platform. When within one line of men from his objective he stopped and looked carelessly around. Hopalong was in the second line on the other side, lost in a deep interest of the dancer, his eyes wide open and his mouth relaxed; but he was where he could see Mesquite's expression and every movement. The latter somehow had managed to obtain a place in the front line without killing or getting killed, and his expression was a duplicate of Hopalong's, except that it was not feigned.

Red mentally admitted that there was some foundation to his old friend's fears, and again fretted because of the unaccustomed lightness of his holster. This bothered him, and was bothering him more and more, and as he backed into the crowd he chuckled at the futile motion of his old friend's hand and at the momentary expression of blankness on Hopalong's face as that person realized that both of his holsters were empty and harmless.

The dance over, the crowd made way for the per-

former, who pushed through it and passed Hopalong close by, nodding to this man and speaking to that one, and nonchalantly jabbed a pin into too familiar hands. Red observed that not every hand was so unkindly treated, and farther observed that in every case they belonged to men who looked to be more prosperous than the average. He drifted to the bar and met his friend not far from it.

"Hell!" growled Hopalong. "She's like a gun: forty-five, with plenty of powder. I'll bet she looks like a ra'rin' beauty to th' Kid. Trouble is shapin' up to land on us. Did you see his pop eyes, an' open mouth? Damn it all!"

"Them bartenders are all ears," warned Red in a low voice.

"Ever see any that wasn't?" grunted Hopalong, whose opinion of bartenders was founded on years of experience. "Cussed vultures, th' hull lot of 'em. Windy know-nothin's that reckon they know everythin'. I see three of 'em from here that are mebby goin' to wish they was never born."

This sailing straw indicated to Red the windage of trouble, and his straying hand, again finding nothing to caress, rose and fastened to the sagging belt. Something told him that it was getting to be about time for the muleys to drop back and join the drag, well to the rear of the healthy longhorns, or to acquire horns. This trail was leading to trouble. He could smell it as a thirsty steer can smell water. The hum of the gambling crowd grew louder now and he glanced that way.

"Wait till th' Kid sees them monte layouts, or th' roulette wheel spinnin'—an' mebby stoppin' where they want it to stop," said Red. "He might as well lose it to her as to some dealer or croupier." He scratched his head gently. "Never saw many punchers that could stay away from a monte layout if they had any money."

"Yo're full of loco!" retorted Hopalong. "Yo're comparin' a burnin' match to a prairie fire in a dry bottom. Th' gambler ain't born that can get a two-bit piece of *that* money away from th' Kid; *but*—Red, me an' you shore has to go an' get drunk. That'll be th' best excuse for be n' under his feet. He knows a drunk is allus in th' way. Wish I had my guns!"

"Then let's get 'em," suggested Red brightly. "We know th' marshal an' his outfit don't bother this place very much, an' if they do happen to bother it, that's a crick we won't cross till we get to it. My right laig's bobbin' up every time I step, like a cork on rough water. What you say? No man with any sense would mill around without his guns in *this* herd."

"It shore is a terrible thing to bust up th' peace of a town like this," replied Hopalong with deep sarcasm. "Seein' we've busted so much peace durin' our lives, I reckon we oughta act nat'ral. We'll go get our guns, an' then get drunk. If she storms, we can weather it, then."

"Shore, I know; drink one an' pour half a dozen in th' spittoons," muttered Red, who had been "drunk" several times before. He turned toward the bar. "I hate to waste likker, but come on."

"Not in here, you Siwash," replied his companion, scowling at the busy dispensers of coloured alcohol. "We'll go out sober an' come back drunk. It'll take 'em some time to get things all set for him."

Red caught sight of one of the confidential bartenders emerging from the dancer's room, a knowing leer on his coarse face. The old Bar-20 rifleman jabbed an elbow in his companion's ribs and wandered toward the street, Hopalong reluctantly lagging along behind him.

As they were lost in the semidarkness outside, Mesquite pushed through the milling crowd in search of them, wondering how he could get rid of them without arousing in them too keen an interest in his own affairs. He paused near the counter, and one of the bartenders leaned over it and beckoned for him to lend a confidential ear. Mesquite obeyed the gesture mechanically, his eyes looking in the direction of the dancer's room.

"Like to meet her, Kid?" whispered the dispenser of drinks. "You look a hull lot different than these tramps in here, an' mebby I can fix things for you. Rosa's a nice gal—*too* nice for a place like this."

The cold assurance which the youth possessed when dealing with men was deserting him. He flushed and searched for words, hardly knowing what he was saying; and almost before he knew it he found a meeting arranged for him. Callow as the bartender regarded him, and clumsily as the opening move had been made, the dispenser of drinks was too wise in his coyote way to rush matters any farther. The youth's poorly restrained eagerness was an assurance that matters would

adjust themselves satisfactorily, and without any further aid.

"You hang round, Kid," said the cheerful man behind the bar. "She'll be out before long," and he calmly resumed his duties, all his doubts at rest.

CHAPTER XI

THE TENDERFOOT

THE crowd in the dance hall thinned gradually, and when the two Bar-20 men returned they stepped high over the sill of the farther door and kept on stepping high along the wall, Red's holster on his far side and hidden by his body from the scrutiny of any one in the room. Hopalong's right hand sheath was similarly hidden, and the left one was empty and very prominent because of it. They found two vacant chairs against the wall near the dancer's door, and they welcomed them with sighs of relief. Red chose his seat so as to keep his holster next to the wall, and as his companion sat down the gun in the right hand sheath was transferred, under the table, to the left-hand one, which to careless observers would prove both to be empty and in strict keeping with the ordinance so made and provided.

Red slumped backward in his chair, his head lolling on a shoulder, and gentle snores were his contributions to the lessening noises of the room. Hopalong slumped the other way, his head in his hands and his elbows on the table. He talked in confidential tones to his unheeding friend, and occasionally the elbow slipped, threatening a minor catastrophe and was precisely and laboriously readjusted. An eager and experienced

waiter timed his visits to the table with cunning forethought and took payment for several orders which he whisked away again before they were tasted, unknowingly saving the two punchers the trouble of surreptitiously pouring them into a cuspidor. Hopalong knew that as long as they paid they would not be disturbed, and he paid mechanically, was careless in counting his change, and delivered a garbled monologue to his sleeping friend. He answered his own questions and had everything his own way, to his obvious satisfaction. A curious and persistent fly liked Red's breath, and while the puncher quivered and fought for self-control, he let the pest wander where it wished, apparently oblivious to its intimate and tickling investigations.

Soprano laughter trilled through an open door near them and invariably was joined by an adolescent voice which at times threatened to turn falsetto, and eventually did. A waiter made another trip into the smaller room and his knowing smile grew steadily. Some jest seemed to be shared by the bartenders, who laughed at each whispered report of their fellow employee.

Hopalong's elbow slipped again and his chin struck the table just as a tall, lean man, dressed in a black frock coat and a blue plush vest, came in from the street, paused to look around the room, and then walked to the bar. His shoulder holster did not show under the voluminous coat, and "Virginia City" Hotchkiss was an adept in making the most of a weapon worn in that manner. A long and checkered career

behind gambling tables had taught him its value, and if Marshal Perkins would continue to let him alone he would guarantee to keep the peace in his own establishment. His livelihood having been made by trimming suckers, he glanced around again from force of habit and his gaze settled on the two drunken punchers across the room, and the emptiness of the only holster in sight at their table was noted. They were a little too drunk to suit him at that moment, and he sneered as Hopalong's elbow slipped again and its owner experimented with the uncertain member. At a word from a bartender Hotchkiss turned and listened with interest to what he was told, made a few terse suggestions and again leaned against the counter, facing the room.

The soprano voice trilled with a pleasing tenderness, which sounded more and more provocative. As the minutes passed the tenderness and provocativeness increased, and the change in the man's voice was illuminating to all who took the trouble to pay any attention to it. It was especially so to the proprietor of the house, three bartenders, two waiters and two sodden cow-punchers, but the last two showed no signs of it.

"Let's play some—some monte, Red," suggested Hopalong, giving up the struggle with the elbow and trying to rise. "Got to get some action. Come on, Flat-head."

Red slobbered, opened his eyes and let them close again, having no interest in monte at the present moment.

Hopalong slumped back in his chair. "Drunk agin,"

he accused in vast disgust. "Allus spoilin' things. Soon's you get in town you go an' spoil things. You can go plumb to hell!"

Red snored.

Hopalong turned uncertainly in his chair and strove to focus his eyes on the door of the gambling room. He saw the proprietor sneering at him and he became pugnacious and indignant; but his defiance died, his pugnacity faded, and he slumped again, this time letting his head fall on his crossed arms on the table. Then he, too, slept.

There came a sudden, angry note in the masculine voice in the little rear room, a scuffle, a woman's sharp cry for help, and in the doorway appeared Mesquite Jenkins, unsteady, disheveled, his face distorted with anger. He was dragging the furious dancer, who fought and screamed while she struggled to stay in the room, and proved that for one person to put another through a door is no light task.

At the first cry for help Hotchkiss darted from the bar, flanked closely by the two waiters, and reached the door as Mesquite and his struggling captive filled it. The gambling room was emptying, its patrons streaming out to see the excitement. Mesquite's roaring accusation of robbery was hysterically denied by the dancer, whose voice no longer was tender and provocative.

Aroused by the sudden turmoil, Hopalong stirred, awakened, raised his head and looked around. He was just in time to see a woman's hand reach out through the door toward the proprietor, who ceased his fighting

long enough to take something from the woman and then pass the object behind his back toward the nearest waiter, who at that moment was very busily engaged with both fists. Hopalong's hand darted out, took the packet, thrust it into his pocket and then, rising, he wholeheartedly and unsteadily flew to the aid of beauty in distress and joined in the fracas.

Mesquite's set phrase, bellowed over and over, the dancer's screamed denials; the profane growling of the struggling proprietor and his two employees, trying in vain to break Mesquite's grip on the woman; Hopalong's joyous whooping as he slammed any head that showed, but indicating a marked partiality for that of "Virginia City" Hotchkiss, turned the room into a bedlam of noise.

Somebody for one instant gave all his attention to Hopalong, and hit him. He must have hit him hard, judging by the way he went stumbling across the room, to strike a table and carom through a door. Red, his Colt slipped inside his shirt, obeyed his friend's cautious signal, roused himself and stumbled after Hopalong, the street swallowing him. No sooner had he become lost to sight than Hopalong staggered in again, both arms hanging limply, his hands and his wrists close against his thighs and hiding the tops of the two holsters. Apparently he had learned his lesson, for he backed into a handy corner and rested against the wall, blinking owlishly at the raging fight.

The crowd from the gambling room had spread across the space in front of the bar, cheering on its favourite in the fight, but the action grew swiftly tamer, for a

waiter had planted a solid blow on Mesquite's jaw and now three sober men were clinging to an unsteady youth who had forgotten his loss and whose thoughts were vague and disconnected. They pushed and hauled and wrestled him toward the street door, being met only with an instinctive and undirected resistance, and, while the bartenders looked around belligerently to see whom they might destroy, the three allied combatants picked Mesquite up and threw him into the street.

The gambling crowd shifted back to its games, low laughter came from behind the closed door of the dancer's room, and the proprietor walked to the bar, tenderly patting an eye that was a credit to its decorator. He looked closely at the two waiters who followed him, each of whom was pampering some selected spot of his anatomy and thanking his luck that Mesquite had not been sober. They stopped beside their employer for commendation of their unhesitant valour and burning loyalty, both flushed by the exercise and the triumph of their joint victory.

The proprietor drew them close to him and spoke softly to them with impartial interest. The victory having been won it now remained to look after the spoils.

"Slip it to Dan," he whispered. "That fool may raise a lot of trouble. He wasn't half drunk enough, an' that's twice she's worked too fast. He'll make a holler, mebby, that Perkins will have to listen to; an' we don't want *him* hornin' in down here. Slip it to Dan, an' go home."

His esteemed employees looked their surprise, glanced at each other inquiringly, shook their heads and then eyed their employer with frank distrust. They both mumbled something and appeared to be uncomfortable.

"What th' hell you figgerin' to do?" snapped Hotchkiss, rage spreading through him. "Slip it to Dan, an' *pronto!*"

"You didn't hand it to me, boss!" earnestly replied the tall waiter, his voice throbbing with sincerity.

"*I* ain't got nothin'!" growled the other, turning to glare at his fellow employee.

"Don't you try to run no blazer on *me!*" snapped Hotchkiss, his eyes sparking. "One of you got it: pass it over, damned *pronto!*"

The taller waiter spoke impolitely to his companion, his accusation bald and frank, just as his companion spoke profanely to him, and in each case the retort was sudden and physical. The gambling crowd filed out again, obviously pleased by so much free entertainment in a place where entertainment cost money, while the bartenders laid hands on various implements under the counter and placed wagers on the outcome.

The proprietor opened his frock coat to be prepared for any eventuality, and then paused, staring at the nearest door, through which meandered Mesquite Jenkins, somewhat sobered, and very much enraged by his remembered loss. He had assimilated a beating which would have put a less rugged and determined man out of action for the balance of the night, but Mesquite could still make motions, though they proved to be futile.

His lip was split, his left eye discoloured, one side of his jaw was swollen, and his face was crisscrossed by the trails of sharp finger nails. His coat was gone, his vest hung on him by one armhole, his shirt was split up back and front, and his trousers were torn and covered with dust. Gone was the dandy and all suggestions of toothbrush, clean raiment and boot polish; in his place was a wabbly, wild-eyed, battered fighting man, stripped to his elemental nature; but while he wabbled, his course was stubbornly straight enough to apprize all interested parties exactly where he was going. The fighting waiters broke apart, exchanged a profane and wondering truce agreement and waited to see what was going to happen.

Mesquite wabbled on, his knees sagging perilously, and went through the motions of rolling up sleeves which no longer existed. His one good eye was fixed hypnotically on "Virginia City" Hotchkiss, which person now was not so keen for physical combat. He had a vexatious mystery to clear up, and it had to be cleared up before either of the waiters managed to get out of the building and gain time to cache the money.

Hotchkiss stepped quickly backward and stopped with his right foot and shoulder advanced, which motion was very informative to the quiet puncher in the corner, whose elbows now swiftly crooked out from his sides as the dangling hands moved upward and slightly outward. Their fingers were crooked, and in the space between the first finger and the thumb of each hand could be seen the well-worn walnut grips of a Colt. There was nothing fancy about the handles of those

two guns, for their owner had found ivory slippery to sweaty hands, and pearl, as all men knew, was too fragile to stand rough use. When it came to the essentials, Hopalong was guided entirely by utility.

Hotchkiss made a lightninglike stab under the edge of his coat with his right hand, and then froze rigidly at the snapped command, a command which throbbed with danger.

"Hold it!"

Hotchkiss turned his head and saw a miraculously sobered two-gun puncher balanced on the balls of his feet, slightly crouched, his crooked arms and fingers ready to make the draw which never had been beaten. On the puncher's face was a malignancy like the mask of hovering Death. The cold eyes peered out from between closely narrowed lids, the thin lips were pressed together and the jaw was set belligerently.

There was such a suggestion of lynx about the puncher that some of the onlookers glanced instinctively to see if there were tufts on his ears. The proprietor's glance became a stare as he saw the cold rage, the look of the killer in the other's eyes, face and attitude. Here was Death, poised to strike, and Hotchkiss read it, believed it, and moistened his lips.

"Who th' hell are you?" he whispered, waiting for a chance, for a moment's indecision on the part of the other.

"Hopalong Cassidy, if it's any of yore business!" answered the puncher, slipping slowly forward, his guns still undrawn.

The soft slip of his boot soles across the sanded floor

sent chills up the spines of the onlookers; and at the mention of this name a low murmur ran through the room. The units of the gambling crowd tried to shrink and become less conspicuous. The bartenders released their holds on various objects under the counter and leaned against the back bar, carefully folding their arms across their chests. They wanted no uncertainty as to their intentions. Hotchkiss drew in his breath sharply, and paled, and again wet his lips.

"What—you want?" he asked, his stare unwavering. He could not look away.

"That gun!" snapped Hopalong. "Either use it, or drop it on th' floor, an' kick it this way." He snapped a command to the bartenders, who complied with it instantly, although many find it fatiguing to hold their hands aloft for any length of time. Under the circumstances a matter like fatigue was something for the future to concern itself about and had nothing whatever to do with the pressing present.

Mesquite had paused uncertainly at the sharp interruption, but now began to weave forward again, and again rolled up imaginary sleeves. He was like a man in a trance.

"Sit down, Kid!" ordered Hopalong, and there was some quality in the voice which made the youth instinctively obey. Mesquite staggered to the nearest table, dropped on a chair and slumped forward, his head falling on his outflung arms.

"Use it, Hotchkiss, or drop it!" snapped Hopalong. "*Pronto!*"

Hotchkiss, his hand still on the butt of his weapon,

hesitated, peering into the frosty eyes of the man who confronted him, a man famous throughout the length and breadth of the cattle country, in all of whose known history there was provided no crumb of comfort for any man who faced him. The proprietor's experience was that of a life spent mostly on the shifting frontier, and he had boasted that he knew men. His present pleasing opulence indorsed that statement. He was face to face with one of the breed that never quit, never backed up, and the name he had heard guaranteed this. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead at the thought of a new danger: suppose he complied with the command and the two-gun man misread his obedient motion? The puncher's eyes were as blank as the wall of a house.

"I won't make no mistake," sneered Hopalong, reading the fear and recalling the wetting of the other's lips. "I know you better'n you know yoreself. Get rid of that snub nosed gun!"

Hotchkiss relaxed his arm, and his elbow fell slightly and lay against his body. Then his sleeve slowly emerged from beneath his coat. His white wrist came into sight, a pasty white wrist from being indoors too much, and as it did so his opening fingers let the gun fall down behind the shielding coat, strike his foot and glance off. He moved the foot slightly and shoved the weapon, spinning, toward the two-gun man.

"*You*, bums!" snapped Hopalong, his eyes now squarely on the aching bartenders. "Come out of that, an' lean ag'in' th' wall, in plain sight." As they obeyed with a certain eager celerity he straightened

out of the slight crouch, let his fingers uncurl, and whistled softly.

Red Connors sauntered in through the farther door, his holster comfortably full again, and one trouser pocket bulging suspiciously. It had a right to bulge, considering that it held more than thirteen hundred dollars, even though it belonged to another man. Red acted as if he had rehearsed his part, for he stepped up behind his old friend, drew the others' guns from their holsters, balanced them judiciously and then slipped his capable thumbs over the worn hammers. He moved sidewise to the wall, leaned his back against it and grinned happily.

"Hot iron, Hoppy!" he grunted.

"You got a lickin' comin'," said Hopalong to the proprietor as he stripped off his coat and tossed it on a near-by table. "I'm goin' to put my mark on yore hide. You stole th' Kid's money. Took it outa th' hand of that red-head dancer an' passed it on toward that tall waiter. For that yo're payin' through yore skin. I was goin' to clean out this honkatonk, but you'll do, instead."

Mesquite Jenkins had been plied with liquor, and beaten until he had only vague suspicions of his present whereabouts; but his friend's statement about the money acted on him like a galvanic current on a ganglion. He sat upright and struggled to get to his feet, mumbling incoherent curses at his independent and refractory knees. The spirit was exuberantly willing, but the flesh was pitifully weak.

"Set still, Kid," reproved Red kindly, filled with

admiration for the youth. "You'll be right in front of these here guns if you get up." He shook his head sadly. "*That* ain't no way to act." He nodded as Mesquite slumped down again.

"Thanks for tellin' me which thief got it," retorted Hotchkiss, who had not taken his eyes from Hopalong and was recovering his nerve, now that he was only faced with physical combat. "After I get through with you, Cassidy, I'll be all warmed up for *that*——" As he mouthed the epithet he leaped.

Hotchkiss was a younger man than his adversary, but he had spent years of his life behind gaming tables, kept poor hours and for the last two years had lived easy. He was going against a man who was whalebone and whipcord, actuated by a righteous indignation and an inherent hatred for crookedness. He expected to meet a rough-and-tumble fighter of the frontier, of his own kind; but he soon found that the bow-legged puncher's straight blows were solid, well timed, and carried a driving shoulder behind them. No matter where they landed they hurt him all over. Do what he could he was kept at a distance, and the other evaded his bull-like rushes and made him pay dearly for them. He slowed rapidly, once he started, and his arms grew heavy and numb. What blows he had driven home had missed their intended marks, while his fast closing eyes and giddy brain made him wilder and wilder.

He was being systematically cut to pieces and cruelly punished, and his helplessness maddened him. Then came his last, despairing effort. He gathered himself together and rushed, head down. Hopalong moved a

little to one side, his left arm circled before him in a short, half swing, slightly upward. It struck the angle of the proprietor's jaw, and as the head snapped up and to one side, a right uppercut, with all the puncher's straining body lifting it, struck the point of the gambler's chin. As the blow went home the puncher, breathing a little more rapidly than usual, turned his back on the somersaulting proprietor and picked up his coat.

The sound of the falling man jarred Mesquite into action. He struggled to his feet and raised his groping hands, turning slowly to look about the room through blurred eyes. He staggered and started to fall, and found Hopalong steadying him and leading him slowly toward the door.

"You can lick him to-morrow, Kid, if you wants," promised the two-gun puncher, grinning proudly at the youth's indomitable spirit. He glanced over his shoulder at the pleased Red. "Come on, Carrot Top."

Red looked around the room, calmly, pugnaciously, reading face after face, and in each finding a pacific spirit which thwarted his soaring ambition. He jerked away from the wall, let his hands fall to his sides and then, the Colts swinging carelessly, he nonchalantly sauntered toward and through the open door and into the dark gloom of the street. Ahead of him his two friends walked laboriously toward the hotel, and he quickened his steps to give his aid to Hopalong, who was half carrying the youth. Mesquite's mumbled words reached him and he chuckled.

"'Tain't only th' money, Hoppy," growled the youth. "I thought *she* was pure gold."

"Red's got th' money in his pants pocket, waitin' to give it to you," replied Hopalong, changing his grip on the unsteady youngster. "An' as for that red-headed dancer, Kid, many a tenderfoot has been fooled by iron pyrites."

Red chuckled again and strained for the reply.

"Hell, Hoppy, *I* ain't no tenderfoot!" rejoined Mesquite, his indignation stimulating him a little.

"Every man's a tenderfoot where wimmin are concerned," growled the two-gun puncher, and then turned his head at a sound suspiciously like ironic laughter. "What's so funny, you Flathead?" he demanded.

"If I told you, you'd get insulted," answered Red. "Go on—it's goin' to rain—*some* day," and Red laughed again louder and louder.

CHAPTER XII

THE PARSON

WITH their supplies renewed, the three trail pilgrims left Dodge behind them, crossed Duck and Sawlog creeks, and pushed out on the bare prairie, following the old and well marked cattle trail. They had left behind them the rougher country of the Cimarron and Canadian, with their timbered ridges and valleys, for they now had reached the edge of the prairie proper, the southern edge of the Great American Desert, as it had been erroneously named.

The gentle prairie swells stretched away as though the undulations of some uneasy, green sea had been caught and held in rigid immobility by a supernatural power. The horizon now lay at a greater distance, and the fuel problem became a matter of moment. If it had not been for the chips of former herds, which to some extent had taken the place of the buffalo in this provision, they would have found the problem a serious one. Except for the narrow fringes of timber along the creeks, there was not a stick to be seen. Mesquite Jenkins, the youngest of the three, and greatly disfigured because of a physical disagreement in Dodge, found it a distinct innovation to start his collection of fuel every afternoon and deposit the chips in a bag on one of the pack animals.

And he found the fire they made to be different from that of burning wood, with less blaze and more heat if the chips were dry; but a smoldering pile to try the patience of a cook if they were wet.

The lazy days passed uneventfully, and then they stopped to adjust a packsaddle when within sight of the timber fringe of a dreaded creek slough, the reputation of which was well established along the trail. The pack adjusted and properly secured, they pushed on at a little brisker pace, curious as to what they would find; and when they got close enough to the stream they found it bank-full and overflowing on the prairie. At this pertinent reminder of earlier days Hopalong looked at Red Connors and grinned.

"Here she is, bank-full, an' mean as all hell," he said, eyeing the sluggish and treacherous creek with strong disfavour, not so much for the present moment as in remembrance of past indignities suffered here. "A few feet of water, an' th' Lord only knows how much soft mud under it. Of all th' streams I ever cussed, I've cussed this one th' hardest. Most of th' sand bottom rivers could be forded a few days after the level fell to normal, but this puddle of mud shore takes its own time."

"Let's split, an' ride along it both ways," suggested Mesquite out of the heart of his simplicity. "Couple of shots will be th' signal if we find a ford. Reckon we we can hear shots a long way out on this flat." He grunted. "That is, if th' mirage don't do somethin' to 'em!"

Red chuckled. "Don't reckon it'll interfere with

hearin'. Yo're still smartin' over that railroad train you saw west of th' trail, ain't you?"

Mesquite considered the kindness of heart which had led his companions to refuse to accept his reckless bets on the material qualities of his railroad train, and held his tongue. He had seen the passengers looking out of the windows of the cars, and he had offered to bet everything he owned on the judgment of his own eyes; but when the train started to expand into dimensions beyond all credulity, and when a small bunch of enormous cattle nonchalantly walked through the side of a car, he had found a quick relief in a change of subject, and in the pleasing thought that his bets had not been taken up. Once more he shifted the topic.

"What you say we split, an' hunt for a ford?" he persisted.

Hopalong shook his head. "No use. We'll find th' prairie bridge across it hereabouts. Remember it, Red?"

"Yes," answered Red. "Any time I use an ax an' shovel, repairin' a dirt causeway, I ain't likely to forget it. I cut more logs, dragged more brush, toted more shovelfuls of dirt that day than any man alive *ever* did. But," he chuckled, "we got th' herd over, after due prayers, persuasion, persistency and profanity."

"Took us two days to get th' first bunch started across," said Hopalong, "after which it was all sugar candy. Reckon we better look around for it."

At this eminently sensible suggestion they turned and rode along the bank of the slough, their eyes on a patch of brushy second-growth which made a prominent dip

in the tree line, and by its nature informed them that at some time, none too remote, trees had been cut down there. They found the end of the causeway indicated by other signs on the bank. Two rows of stakes and windrows of dead brush, converging into a V, with the point on the bank of the creek, revealed the chute into which cattle had been pointed. Hopalong was about to ride boldly across the unseen and submerged causeway, when Red checked him.

"You better cut a pole and sound a little," he cautioned. "You'd look fine if th' damned thing ain't there no more."

Hopalong glanced at the converging fence on the near bank, across at the fence on the farther bank, and raised his eyebrows.

"Judgin' from these chutes, where th' devil do you reckon th' bridge would be? Back som'ers on th' Brazos?"

"It ain't none of my funeral, you damn fool!" retorted Red, bridling. "Go ahead! We can rope you an' th' cayuse, an' drag you both out. It wouldn't be th' first time. Go on, Flathead!"

"But I'm curious," said Hopalong with his well known frankness. "I want to get a line on just how you think. I've been doubtful, for years, that you thought a-tall. Seein' these chutes, on both banks, just where do you figger on findin' th' bridge? Straight between 'em, or up on th' Platte? What kind of a game do you reckon they was playin' when they built these here chutes? Ring aroun' th' rosie?"

"More likely ring aroun' th' moon, for there's a storm

brewin'!" retorted Red pugnaciously. "Yo're settin' damn near th' center of it, you red headed wart! She could 'a' washed out, couldn't she? An' if she did, you know damn well what's under her! Go ahead—ride in! Nobody's stoppin' you!"

"There ain't current enough in this mud hole to wash nothin'!" retorted Hopalong, paying no attention to Mesquite, who had dismounted and was fumbling at a pack.

"Then why did we allus have to stop an' patch it up?" asked Red.

"Because it was wore out, that's why," snorted Hopalong. "Take an average of a thousand head to a herd, an' th' Lord only knows how many herds a season, an' somethin' had to wear. Why, th' weight of them cattle would sink it, more'n more, let alone wear it out."

"I ain't got nothin' to say," rejoined Red, "except that you can do what you want, when you want, and how you want. If cattle wore it out one season, they'd wear it out th' next, wouldn't they? How do we know when it was patched last, or how good th' work was done? You oughta know how these prairie streams act under prairie rainstorms. But I ain't got a word to say, not a word. If you want to get mired, that's yore own business; but you can't say I didn't try to squeeze some sense in yore walnut head. It won't be th' first time I've pulled you——"

"Will you close that pie sump?" shouted Hopalong. "You may be a man of few words, but you shore can use 'em harder an' faster than any——"

"Aw, go to hell!" snapped Red, wheeling to ride over

and show Mesquite how to swing an ax. As he saw that the ax had been swung enough, his good intentions were strengthened, and he felt no reluctance in giving the youth the benefit of his own knowledge of ax-craft; but Mesquite unkindly finished trimming the pole and had climbed into his saddle before his instructor arrived. Red drew rein and waited, while Mesquite, dragging the pole, rode up to him.

"I was goin' to show you how to use that ax, Kid," said Red, with grave intentness.

"You can show me when we camp," replied Mesquite, checking his smile. "You cut th' firewood, an' I'll set down an' watch how you do it. I been thinkin' we oughta make you th' ax man of this here party."

Red slowly turned his horse and fell in behind his too willing, future pupil, eyeing the dragging pole.

"Huh!" he exclaimed. "You'd never make no Injun, draggin' a pole like that,"

"Bein' an Injun, I reckon, has its advantages, around annuity time," replied Mesquite. "How ought I drag it?"

"Big end on th' ground, to save th' cayuse. Ever see a lodge-pole trail windin' across th' prairie?"

"Lodge-pole trails don't wind across th' prairie," cut in Hopalong loudly. "They trail straight across th' prairie; an' as for bein' an Injun, I don't reckon Mesquite wants to be no squaw. I never saw a buck draggin' no lodge-poles, an' neither did you, Carrot Top." He turned to Mesquite, holding out his hand. "Gimme that pole, Kid, before yore cayuse drops under its weight."

"*I'm* scoutin' out this bridge," replied Mesquite, pushing on. "It's about time for me to do somethin' to show I ain't no ornament. Havin' sent that stolen money back where it belongs, I got a pretty clear conscience. Death ain't got no terrors for me, no more," he laughed.

"Gosh, Hoppy, can you see 'em?" asked Red in a far-away voice.

"See what?" demanded Hopalong, looking around the prairie.

"Th' herd bein' closed up an' p'inted for this crossin'. I can see 'em as plain as if it was yesterday."

"An' I can hear yore language as plain as if it was to-day," rejoined Hopalong; but it was obvious that his thoughts, too, were wandering. The sound of Mesquite's splashing horse brought them back to the present, and he knew from the lack of all sounds of floundering that the horse had found something more solid than the bottom of the slough. The stream, swollen as it was, was not over twenty to twenty-five paces wide, and this, coupled with its sluggish current and its solid banks, masked its treacherous nature. To a casual glance it was an insignificant creek, but it had fooled more than one trail boss who had taken too much for granted.

Mesquite went on, slowly and cautiously, prodding diligently with the pole, Hopalong behind him at the distance of half a rope's cast, and Red waiting on the bank, where he had solid footing under his horse in case its weight should be needed against a rope. Here and there the pole slid down unresistingly, where holes had

formed in the causeway; and at the extreme left the pole found no resistance whatever, and thus marked the western edge of the bridge. Crossing safely, Mesquite stopped and loosened his rope. He shook out a loop, lay some of the straight-away against one side to make it open properly, and flexed his wrist experimentally. Hopalong paused some half dozen paces from the north bank and turned in his saddle, ready to act as another roper.

Red drove the pack animals into the stream and slowly followed them, careful not to push them too hard. The loaded animals swung their ears forward and felt their way across, walking as if on eggs. In a few minutes the whole party was over and pushing northward again, their eyes on a distant line of timber which announced the presence of another stream. The prairie swells were low, and at only a few places did the rises shut out the timber fringe.

Mesquite's rope did not suit him the way it acted, and he swung it once and let go. Just as it straightened out, the loop opened to its full width and swiftly contracted, the *hondo* slipping toward the end at a quick motion of the caster's hand. He dragged it a moment and then recoiled it, all the twists out of it.

"Forty?" asked Red, estimating its length.

"Yeah," grunted the youth, making it fast at the pommel. "I knew a feller that used a fifty footer; but forty is my size."

"Forty-five's my length," said Red. "Only man I ever knew that could use a fifty footer, an' use it *right*, was Lanky Smith. I've seen him throw a sixty footer in a way that 'd make you open yore eyes."

Hopalong grunted. "Lanky was a one-thing man. As a roper I never saw his equal, but outside of ropin' he didn't amount to much." He paused, and then qualified the remark. "I don't exactly mean that. Outside of ropin' he wasn't nothin' *startlin'*, just average. But he shore could throw a rope!"

"Good thing you said what you mean," growled Red. "I was just gettin' ready to rowel you." He shifted in the saddle. "Lanky's all right."

"Every one of th' old gang's all right," said Hopalong, and his thoughts leaped miles and years.

"Are they all up where we're goin'?" asked Mesquite, his eyes glowing.

"All but Johnny," said Red, "an' us. Too bad th' Kid couldn't come along."

"Funny how you'll figger a feller wrong," soliloquized Mesquite. "I was gettin' all set to pull a gun on him."

"Jest as well you didn't," replied Hopalong, and changed the subject.

Since leaving the Smoky Hill, along which there were traces of the old stage road, they had crossed no river of any size. Grinnell, a station on the Kansas Pacific, offered them no excitement. It was one of the established points for keeping in touch with the home ranch and the "old man," but they had no herd to receive orders about, and loafed in the little hamlet without a care. Spending a night there they pushed on again, eager to get to Ogallala, still many miles away.

During the next few days they in turn crossed both forks of the Sappa, the Beaver, and then neared the

Republican, where a tough collection of human buzzards at one time had squatted not far from the trail crossing to trim any easy marks that rode up. The remembrance of this nondescript collection of tents and mud huts stirred Hopalong. To his mind came thoughts of numerous indignities which had been suffered by cattle trailing outfits, and he announced that he was going to take a look at the "coyotes," and see if there were any "bones to pick."

"Shore!" growled Red in disgust, glancing at his old friend out of the corner of his eyes, but secretly itching to inject himself into any riot which ensued. He did not need two guesses to interpret the expression on Hopalong's face. "You'll get in some brace game an' start things. That's a bad bunch over there; they all pull together."

"'Tain't no question of 'em pullin' together," growled Mesquite, properly catching the drift of the talk. "It's pullin' *first* that counts. You start any damn thing you wants, Hoppy. Start it any place at any time."

Hopalong's eyes were beginning to glint, and he nodded to the youth. "Last time I was up here I got in a brace game, an' had to act polite because we had near fifteen hundred head on our hands to *make* us act polite. We ain't got no cattle now to hold us down, an' I'm goin' lookin' for that squint-eyed faro dealer that tried to run th' six spot off under a queen. It 'll mebby limber us up a little for Ogallala, too."

They jogged along in silence, and in due time dismounted in front of a tent, set among a collection of sod huts, not far from the ford of the Republican. The

sod dugouts were only ruins, their roofs fallen in, their low doors blocked with rubbish. Two aged horses were grazing in a little prairie hollow, and a broken wagon, of the old prairie schooner type, stood near one of the dugouts.

Hopalong shook his belts. "Looks like some trail gang went on th' prod an' cleaned out this dump," he said regretfully. "Oh, well, they shore had it comin' to 'em."

From the tent emerged a long, blacksuited figure which arose from its crouch, section by section, and at last became a tall, cadaverous human, with long hair and a grave face. Mesquite stepped quickly and silently past Red, where he could watch the tent at a different angle, not knowing just what to expect, but intending to be prepared for the worst.

"Welcome, brothers," said the tall man in a mournful voice which seemed to come out of his boots. He turned toward the tent again. "Mother, come out and give these strangers welcome." He swung around and looked at each of the three newcomers in turn. "May God deal gently with you weary pilgrims and lead you from yore sins."

Mesquite kicked viciously at a tomato can, and sighed, and then exchanged grins with his friends; but they had sense enough, when a little faded woman emerged from the tent, to take off their hats and step on the other foot.

"Pleased to meetcha, ma'am," mumbled Hopalong, his late warlike intentions making him feel a little self-conscious.

"Me, too," said Red, rearranging his hatband. But he could get a new band at Ogallala, so it didn't matter.

Mesquite glanced from the ruined hatband to its owner, and grinned insultingly. "Flathead," he whispered out of a corner of his mouth.

"You men must have been sent by the Lord in His infinite mercy," replied the little old woman, her kind face wrinkling with hope and pleasure.

"Yo're a hell of an angel!" whispered Mesquite to Red, and grunted as Red's elbow found a soft and unprepared mark.

"Our wagon broke down," continued the woman. "Perhaps you will know how to fix it for us."

"Ma'am," said Hopalong earnestly, "we can fix anythin'. How'd you come to get so far from th' settlements?"

"We came out to preach th' Gospel at th' round-ups," explained the gloomy individual. "Then the accident happened, an' we've been here two weeks. Our supplies are nearly gone. I wouldn't mind so much for myself, but——"

"Uh-huh," said Hopalong understandingly.

"Round-ups?" inquired Red incredulously. "Where?"

"All over th' range, friend."

Red whistled. "All over th' range!" he repeated. "Huh! What 'd I tell you about this trail peterin' out?" he demanded of Hopalong.

But Hopalong was looking at the wagon. Its broken wheel presented no great difficulty to his practical mind. He had seen more than one chuck wagon get along with

a broken wheel; but he wondered how any mature human being could be so helpless as to let such an accident maroon him and threaten him with starvation. He turned to the pack horse and unfastened the ax.

"Here, Kid," he said, holding out the tool. "Take that carrot-headed half-breed with you an' ride over to th' river. Pick out a saplin' about as thick as that wagon tongue, an' as straight as you can find. Trim it good an' bring it back with you. *I* ain't carin' which end drags on th' ground, me not bein' no Injun."

Mesquite passed the ax on to Red.

"Here's where you gimme that lesson," he said, beaming with eager expectation. It was a very hot day and he knew there would be clouds of mosquitoes along the river.

Red's mouth opened, but he remembered the presence of the woman in time. He took the ax, glared at Mesquite, and led the way toward the timber fringe.

"How self-reliant you cowboys are!" said the little woman.

"Yes'm," said Hopalong, and backed off toward the nearest dugout to take a look around.

He was puzzled, for during the last few days he and his friends had seen signs of a recent herd on the trail, and the signs had grown fresher with each passing day. At the present moment it could not be more than three or four days' drive ahead of them. How was it that the outfit had not fixed up this broken wagon wheel and helped this couple on their way again?

As he climbed out of the first dugout the tall stranger approached him, his melancholy face trying to smile.

"I don't care so much for myself," he said; "but mother—" He choked a little and held out his hand.

Hopalong took it mechanically, and as his own closed over it a disturbing thought came to him, but he instantly banished it as being unworthy and uncalled for. True, the parson's hand was as soft and well kept as a gambler's. He carelessly turned it palm up as he released it, and the thin skin of the fingertips stamped themselves on his mind.

"Aw shucks," he growled. "We'll get you outa this in a hurry. There was a time when nobody could 'a' busted down anywhere along this trail, an' stayed busted for more'n a day or so. Reckon Red's right —this old trail's shore peterin'. When did th' last herd go up?"

"We ain't seen none for two weeks," answered the parson.

Hopalong glanced at the ashes of the camp fire. "Where'd you bust th' wheel?" he asked, his careless glance failing to find anything in the immediate vicinity rough enough to break a wagon wheel as completely as this one had been broken.

"Right here," answered his companion. "It was shore lucky it happened so close to this old highway."

"Yeah," grunted Hopalong, and wandered back to the pack animals.

He took off the packs, stacked them against the low side of a dugout, and let the animals wander off to graze. Chancing to look toward the river, he saw his two friends returning, Mesquite trailing along behind Red and intently studying how the leader dragged the

sapling. Mesquite waved his hand and finished the motion by placing a thumb to his nose and aiming his fingers at Red's back. Hopalong scowled at this display of vulgarity, and hoped the little woman in the tent had not been looking out toward the advancing horsemen. It was not long before the two were close at hand, and Hopalong smothered a grin at the words he heard.

"You shore got th' hang of swingin' that ax, Red," said Mesquite enviously. "An' I never did see nobody that knowed how to drag a tree better'n you. Course them muskeeters made you miss a couple of times, but this here tree don't have to be none fancy, nohow."

Red turned in his saddle to relieve his feelings, but Hopalong's low warning reached him in time, and he swallowed hard and took it out in thinking.

"What're you goin' to do with that saplin'?" asked the parson, mildly surprised

"Use it for a skid in place of that busted wheel, an' let you get to Ogallala an' a wheelwright," answered Red, dismounting, and going to work. It did not take the three punchers long to notch the sapling, place it properly under the wagon, and fasten it securely over the front axle, run the smaller end under the rear axle and loosely rope it to the hub of the broken wheel. The wagon settled a little at that corner, but with level prairie, and no short turns to make, it would last many miles.

"There," grunted Red, straightening his back, "that'll get you to Ogallala."

At this second mention of the town on the Platte, the

parson threw up his hands in righteous horror. "Ogallala! That sink of iniquity! We shall not go to Ogallala, my friends."

Hopalong grinned reminiscently.

"It *is* a sorta cesspool," he admitted; "but I allus reckoned a parson was hot on th' scent to find places like that. Ogallala shore needs plenty of parsons."

"Marshals, first," grunted Red, who knew the town.

"We were threatened with tar and feathers, and driven from Ogallala in th' night!" exclaimed the parson.

"Y' don't say!" ejaculated Red in vast surprise. He never had known a town so tough that it threatened tar and feathers for a minister and his wife; and he wondered where Ogallala would get the feathers. It was his opinion, based on several nights spent in the town, that there were no feather ticks in the place. Corn husks and hay were about the measure of Ogallala's mattresses.

"You oughta get a wheelwright," said Hopalong. "Throw in with us," he invited. "There won't be no tar an' featherin'." But he spoke in vain, for the parson shook his head and went back to the tent.

The punchers stripped their horses and turned them loose to graze, and were building a fire to cook dinner for the combined party, when a grinning cow-puncher loped up from the direction of the trail. He swung down, scowled at the tent, and squatted near the fire, idly pulling the short buffalo grass with nervous fingers as he made himself known.

"I'm cuttin' trail t'other side of th' river," he an-

nounced. "Likewise I'm keepin' this country purty much under my eye. Where'd you pass th' last trail herd?"

"On Mulberry," answered Hopalong, busy with the bacon. He sliced off another ration and tossed more coffee in the pot. "Eat a smack with us, friend."

"Got my own grub on my saddle; but I'll take a tin of coffee," replied the trail cutter. "Where's the Mulberry herd from, an' where'd it winter?"

"'Fraid of th' fever?" asked Red.

"We ain't takin' no chances. There's an awful sight of cattle both sides of th' Platte. All th' cricks an' rivers up Ogallala way have herds on 'em. Most of 'em are on th' graze, though there's a few ranches located hereabouts on a couple of th' streams. We're lookin' at every trail boss's papers, up this way."

"How many herds you represent?" asked Hopalong.

"I got nine brands on my papers," replied the trail cutter. "Th' next feller, north of me, has near sixteen. Where's that trail herd from?"

"Down Corpus Christi way; but I don't know where they wintered," answered Hopalong.

"I'm bettin' they ain't wintered a-tall."

"They could 'a' done that near Dodge," said Red. "There's a sight of cattle down that way, an' it shore was a cold winter. You ain't got nothin' to fear."

The trail cutter growled something, picked up his tin cup of hot coffee, and shifted it from hand to hand to let it cool.

"There's a lot of Pawnee full-bloods an' half-breeds herdin' up this way," he said. "They ain't good for

nothin' else, but I reckon there ain't no better herders on earth *while* they're *sober*. They get ten dollars a month an' their keep for driftin' th' herds. Likker peddlers won't live long hereabouts. If you meet up with any, you boys might spread that information." For the last few minutes he had been looking at the sapling rigged to the running gear of the wagon, and a grin came to his face. "You fellers fix that?"

"Shore," answered Mesquite proudly. "Good job, ain't it?"

"Never saw none better," admitted the trail cutter, and choked on a mouthful of hot coffee. When he could speak he leaned over toward Hopalong. "Purty hefty lift, wasn't it, that wagon?"

"Purty hefty, but not enough to unpack th' load," answered Hopalong. "Red an' th' Kid h'isted it for me." He turned to Mesquite and handed the youth a tin plate piled with food. "Here, Kid, take this to th' tent. This ain't no gang for a parson an' his wife to feed with."

Red was looking at the trail cutter.

"Hoppy says it wasn't heavy," he said. "Seein' he didn't do no liftin', I reckon it wasn't heavy to him. Me an' th' Kid found that corner all we could handle."

The trail cutter rolled a cigarette and seemed to be mildly amused by something; but when he spoke it was about his trade.

"Th' last herd acrost th' river, here, wintered north of Dodge," he said. "I looked it over before they pointed it for th' crossin', but they only had one Bar

U an' two S Circles. Reckon they got into th' herd at night."

"They'll get in somehow, you can bet," said Red.

"How long ago was that?" asked Hopalong, his gaze on the hub of the broken wheel.

"Four days back. They was waterbound two days. You'll pass 'em between here an' th' Platte, for they was figurin' on holdin' th' herd this side of th' river. It's made up of twelve hundred head, mixed an' th' numbers of calves was growin' rapid every day. Th' new owner rode down an' met 'em, an' when he saw th' calves he told th' outfit to drive easy an' rest up a bit south of th' river. Near sixty per cent. of them calves will live if they're treated right. Th' outfit had to take th' youngest of 'em acrost th' Republican in th' wagon, an' shore wasn't fit to talk to for two days."

"How's th' ford now?" asked Red.

"Easy. Most of them heavy rains over west were south of this divide," answered the trail cutter. "There's one place where th' ford's some shallower than th' rest of it. I'm ridin' that way now. Come along, one of you, an' I'll locate it for you."

"You an' Red go, Hoppy," said Mesquite, collecting the dishes. "I'll borry some of th' parson's water, an' you can bring back a coupla buckets for it. It's my turn to red up."

"Got a notion to look around th' river for old times' sake," said Hopalong. "Want to come, Red?"

"Shore."

"Take yore time, Kid," said Hopalong to Mesquite. "We're stoppin' here for th' night."

They took their own bucket and the parson's, and in a few minutes were riding toward the ford of the Republican, an easy crossing for cattle under ordinary circumstances. As they went along Hopalong saw traces of the trail made by the parson's wagon, and on one of the two slight turns he made out the marks of four wheels. This located the breaking of the wheel as having occurred near or at the camp, and to this extent bore out its owner's words; but what was there in the near vicinity of the camp that would break a wagon wheel so completely? And a herd had passed his camp within four days, which made a liar out of the parson. There could be no doubt of this, because the cattle signs were quite recent, and it was not a choice between the trail cutter's word and that of a wearer of the cloth.

They stopped at the river bank, and after a few parting words with the trail cutter they watched his course across the stream, noted it, and then rode in a few feet to let their horses drink. They filled the buckets before they rode out again, and then sat quietly in their saddles and watched the hurrying water.

"Somethin' stinks," said Hopalong.

Red sniffed. "Don't smell nothin'."

"You nat'rally wouldn't," retorted Hopalong. "We'll kill a little time. Only thing that bothers me is th' parson's wife. If I'm loco I might as well find it out now as later."

"Figger they're on th' rustle?" asked Red sarcastically. He sneered. "They work together. He makes a noise like a pack of wolves, an' she runs off th' herd. I can see her bulldoggin' a hefty yearlin', while he holds

th' round-up herd, th' day herd an' th' cut. *Strong* pair, *they* are! Gawd, but yo're dumb!" His yearning for a reply was not gratified, and he tried again. "How you aim to find out anythin' about 'em, less'n yo're som'ers near 'em?"

"Let's cross over an' take a look on th' other side," suggested Hopalong, putting down the filled bucket and riding into the stream.

Red stared after his calm friend, put down his own bucket, and followed, muttering under his breath. As they climbed the other bank and rode out of the timber fringe they saw a horseman wheel sharply, a mile east of the trail, and dash into the cover of the timber.

"What 'd *that* coyote look like to you?" asked Hopalong without drawing rein. He had caught only a glimpse of the distant rider.

"Didn't get a real look at him. Reckon he's our friend, th' trail cutter," said Red, but his voice lacked conviction because he could see the tracks of the trail cutter's horse leading straight up the old cattle trail. He followed his companion, who had ridden on without pausing, and reached his side. "What's that fool head of yourn hatchin' out now?" he demanded.

Hopalong did not rely, and kept on at a lope. They rode up a long swell and down the other side, where both pulled up to let their eyes follow the tracks of the trail cutter's horse, which here turned westward along the bottom of the hollow, hidden by the swells on each side from the view of anyone on the prairie.

"Workin' back to th' river," muttered Hopalong.

"Why? Didn't that other feller look like he might be one of them Pawnee herders he was talkin' about?"

"He was up-wind of us, but I couldn't smell him," answered Red. "He might 'a' been, though. For once in yore fool life I reckon, mebby, you got hold of somethin' worth while. Wouldn't be th' first crooked trail cutter I've heard tell of. Which way we ridin'?"

"You ain't no Flathead; yo're a Rootdigger, than which there ain't nothin' dumber," retorted Hopalong. "We're goin' straight along th' old trail. We'll kill time an' give our bait a chance to work. Come on."

"What bait?" demanded Red.

"Mesquite Jenkins, that's got a lot to learn," growled Hopalong. "Shut up now; I want to think."

"Why don't you fly?" asked Red pleasantly. "You'll find it a lot easier."

CHAPTER XIII

THE SUCKER

MESQUITE finished the few simple duties about the camp, took his horse and the pack animals down to the ford to water them, and brought them back again, riding with a filled bucket in each hand. He hobbled the pack horses, picketed his own, and then returned to the camp to play solitaire until the return of his friends. He was shuffling the cards for the second game when the parson emerged from the tent and walked toward him.

"Hello," said the puncher, grinning up at the newcomer. "Too bad you don't play cards. We could have a game an' kill time," he said jestingly.

"I ain't got no fault to find with cards," replied the parson, who appeared to be broad-minded. "It's th' abuse of 'em that riles me. An' this reminds me that I ought to know somethin' about these gamblin' games, so I can talk against 'em with more intelligence. Congregations out in this part of th' country ought to be talked to in their own language. What is poker, an' how is it played?"

Mesquite recrossed his legs and chuckled. He explained the game for his reverend companion, but deprecated the thought of playing it without stakes, explaining that it was only the check imposed by possible

losses that made it a game. He descanted on this point at length, and was pleased by the way the parson understood it and agreed with him.

"My friend," said the parson, "nothing is learned without paying for it in some way. Whether it's in time, labour, money, or the throwing away of a more lucrative profession, such as I threw away to preach the Gospel, there's allus a payment. My sermons are too academic to appeal to th' people of this country. They want to hear about things they know, an' in words they can understand. It's my aim to serve their best interests, even against their own inclinations, an' th' more I know about th' evils I fight, th' better I *can* fight. Teach me poker, like it ought to be played, but make th' stakes small; I can't afford to lose much."

"Aw, shucks, parson!" growled Mesquite uneasily. "We don't have to play for real stakes. We'll use beans. Two-hand poker ain't no good, nohow."

"But th' principles of th' game are th' same?"

"Oh, shore; th' hands count th' same; only it's a lot more interestin' with more players."

"Then we'll play, an' for real stakes. What's meant by th' word 'limit'?"

Mesquite explained the game and its terms, and his companion brought to light a handful of silver. The puncher grinned apologetically, shoved out the pack, and won the deal. The first few hands amounted to nothing in results, except to excite the parson and to overcome a natural clumsiness in handling the cards.

"Why, this ain't so much a game of cards as it is a study of human nature," he observed, looking at his

hand. "Now, if I was a gambler I'd back these cards real heavy, an' trust to th' bettin' to force you out. That's bluffin', ain't it? Thought so. I'll try it, anyhow, to see how it works." And the parson bet a dollar.

"Bluffin' is a science," said Mesquite reprovingly. "To prove that remark I'll see yore dollar an' raise it another."

"There speaks th' recklessness of youth," rejoined the parson. "Discretion comes with age, and to some it never comes. There is yore dollar, an' five more," he finished, digging down into his left hand trousers pocket and bringing up a handful of gold. "You'll only spend yore money for likker, but th' Lord can make better use of it."

Mesquite stared at the gold piece, studied his companion's face without learning anything worth while, and saw the bet. "You go after knowledge like a calf after its supper," he growled. "I can see where one two-hand game ain't goin' to be any monotonous. There's yore five, an' five more. I warned you that bluffin's a science."

"I gave up science to enter th' ministry," replied the parson. "Still havin' a deep interest in science, I'll improve th' shinin' hour with some shinin' gold. It 'll cost you twenty dollars more to continue yore researches."

Mesquite whistled. "An' me figgerin' parsons didn't have no sand!" he said in admiring tones. "I'm in lock an' stock now, an' might as well chuck in th' barrel. Here's yore twenty. What you got?"

"Has it come to this?" asked the parson in a melan-

choly voice touched with grief. "Th' teacher quittin' to th' ignorant pupil?"

"Ignerent, mebby; but there ain't no accountin' for luck," retorted Mesquite. "Not wantin' to scare you, I'll call that four-card flush before you lose yore likin' for poker."

"What do I do now?"

"Put yore cards down. It's a show-down. What you got?"

"An th' bettin' is all over now?" asked the parson. "But that handicaps a man with a poor hand."

"Usually he's handicapped by nature an' hard luck, anyhow," chuckled Mesquite. "I done told you bluffin' is a science. What you got?"

"Not very much, I'm afraid," sighed the parson, reluctantly spreading his cards on the ground. "It's what you called a straight: six, seven, eight, nine an' ten."

Mesquite stared at it in disgust.

"Straight?" he demanded, "*Straight?*" he snorted. "Don't you see they're all hearts? It's a straight flush! *Phew!*"

"Why, so it is! Why, that's a *strong* hand, ain't it?"

"*Strong?*" growled Mesquite. "Strong as a Durham bull! Rake in, parson—it's all yourn! But how in—aw—did you figger that was a bluffin' hand?"

"If you'd had th' same thing with bigger cards, my hand wouldn't 'a' been no good, would it?" He looked curiously at the backs of Mesquite's cards. "Do I see yours now?"

"To my abidin' sorrer, you do," answered the youth,

spreading his hand alongside the straight flush. Needing a sedative, he hurriedly rolled a cigarette and filled his lungs with the smoke.

"That's too bad; but, as I said, discretion comes with age," said the parson, eyeing the two pairs, and raking in his winnings.

"I'd say there ain't nothin' th' matter with yore discretion," growled Mesquite, "*bluffin'* on a *straight flush!* You must be a lot older'n you look, parson, to have all *that* discretion!"

The parson cleared his throat apologetically. "Now what do we do?" he asked, chinking his winnings.

"Seein' yo're a parson, I don't know," answered the youth; "but if you was a gambler, you'd gimme a chance to win some of it back agin."

"For th' moment I *am* a gambler; but only for what I can learn about this game of Satan. It's only fair that these ill-gotten gains should return to you. Do you know, there *is* a fascination about poker. I don't wonder it has such a grip on humans."

"You set in a tight game with four, five good players an' you'll learn all about th' fascination," chuckled the loser. "Deal 'em up; I'm out for yore scalp, back hair an' all."

As the game progressed, the stakes grew larger, finally reaching the point where it cost five dollars to ante, and ten more to draw cards, and this made both players very keen and very thoughtful. Then came a deal when the parson strung along until the pot had been boosted gently but steadily and had reached respectful proportions.

"I been waitin' for this hand," laughed Mesquite, and raised a double eagle. "Here is where you can pull leather an' it won't save you."

"Come to think of it, you ain't bluffed once," muttered the parson; "an' it looks to me like yo're doin' it now. There's yourn, an' twice as much more."

"Well, I ain't bluffed with a straight flush, *that's* shore," admitted Mesquite, seeing and raising. "Yo're th' greatest rough-an'-tumble parson *I* ever saw, but you're due for a fall. I got a hundred left in my pants, an' it's goin' up, less'n you foller th' discretion of yore years."

"Ah, after a certain point, old age becomes childish," retorted the parson. "Which I'm provin' now. We'll save time by gettin' that hundred of yours in all at once." He pushed out the required amount and, sliding his cards together, sat back and gravely exchanged stares with his adversary, his face long, melancholy, and devoid of any informative expression.

For a minute Mesquite studied the blank countenance across from him, and then gazed earnestly at his own hand. It was a shame to clean out a preacher, but it had been so long since he had seen four queens that he could not resist their persuasive looks. He saw the raise, called, and spread out his cards.

"Four ladies," he chuckled, and reached for the stakes.

"They're the weaker sex," replied the parson, slowly laying down an ace. It was followed by a king and it three brothers. "You don't reckon I played this hand *too* hard, do you?" he asked, thirsting for information.

"Played it—*too* hard!" ejaculated Mesquite, a hand going to his forehead. "Played it—too *hard!*" he repeated. "Parson, that ain't done often enough to make you scared. Don't you never hunt no tall timber when you've got a hand like that!" He picked up the cards while the parson pulled in the winnings, and was about to wrap a leather thong around the deck when something on the back of the top card caught and held his gaze.

He stared unbelievingly, and then, without a word, got to his feet and leaped.

The parson's draw was blocked, and he found his gun wrist gripped as if in a vise. Neither said a word, but fought silently. Mesquite twisted the gun wrist down and back, and tore the derringer from the relaxing fingers and slipped it into a pocket. Then, amidst a shower of blows at too close quarters to carry much weight, the parson reached for the gun in his adversary's holster, and had his hand on the butt before its owner learned of the danger. Mesquite caught the wrist again, and just in time. They struggled furiously and broke apart. The parson leaped in again, desperately anxious to keep the youth too busy to draw the Colt, and Mesquite sneered at the play.

"I don't—aim—to use—no gun—on you!" he gritted, flailing away at the body with both hands.

This system of attack when directed against an untrained man is peculiarly effective, especially if the user of it can obtain arm room. Mesquite obtained the arm room by resting his chin on the other's shoulder

and arching his back. The blows went in solidly to the same mark, and before the parson fully realized his danger and managed to back away, his own wild blows had become wilder and lost much of their power. Suddenly a gleam came into his eyes, which had flashed sidewise for an instant, and he forced himself against his opponent, a bit of strategy which surprised the latter. Before Mesquite could solve this unexpected love for body punishment, a blow from an ax handle glanced from his head and sent him reeling.

The parson tried to take advantage of this auspicious moment, but found his knees to be treacherous, and before he could reach his enemy the latter had recovered, wrested the weapon from the hands of the parson's wife, hurled it as far as he could, and leaped for her wavering husband. A straight left, followed by a driving right, ended the fight, and released Mesquite just in time to see the woman dash into the tent. He sprang after her, and as she emerged with a rifle in her hands he tore it from her, put his foot on it, and grasped her by the wrists.

"I don't aim to fight no woman, ma'am," he said, "leastawise a parson's wife; an' I'm admittin' yo're a hummer. Th' fight bein' over, you can't do no good by stirrin' up a ruckus. I don't want to tie you up."

"You beast!" she retorted, her face crinkled with anger. "To attack a minister of the Gospel, as if he was a barroom bully!"

"He's th' first minister of th' Gospel I ever knew to mark a deck of cards," replied Mesquite. "He's

cheated me outa my last cent; but crooked winnin's don't go. I'll get it all back. If you'll behave yoreself I'll turn you loose."

"What else can I do?" she snapped, glancing at the rifle on the ground.

"I know what you *can't* do," he answered, letting loose of her and picking up the heavy weapon. "You *can't* use this gun." And with the words he threw the cartridge out of the chamber and filled the hammer slot and the breech with sand and dirt.

The sound of a horse made him step back and glance toward the trail, from which rode a half-breed herder and then he looked around at the victim of his body blows. The parson was struggling to sit up, and Mesquite faced the loping newcomer.

"What you do?" demanded the half-breed, scowling. He pulled up and looked from the parson to Mesquite.

"Don't know, but whatever it is I'm only just restin'," answered Mesquite. "You can start things by getting fresh. What *you* doin' here?"

"Me? Me, nothin'. I just happen. Want 'baccy."

"Work hereabouts?"

"Yes. Other side river. Go to river, water hoss. See stranger here, an' want to ask for herd on trail. Got cattle too close, mebby. If herd come I move 'em back. That why. What *you* do?"

"Me?" asked Mesquite, grinning, but not letting himself get the least bit careless. "I just ride around learnin' folks how to play poker. Me, I great teacher."

"Me play," eagerly offered the half-breed. "Poker,

faro, monte, coon-can. Race hosses. Shootem what you call dice."

"Gosh!" chuckled Mesquite, the rising parson under his eyes. "Yo're a reg'lar gambler. You an' th' parson oughta team up."

"Keep yore cheap jokes to yoreself," growled the parson, wabbling toward them. He passed his conqueror with a scowl and went into the tent, with Mesquite at his heels. The latter's shadow darkened the entrance, and the parson turned.

"What you want *here*?" he demanded.

"I'm never careless with firearms," answered Mesquite. "Mine, or anybody else's. Better come outside where there won't be none to tempt you."

At this moment Hopalong and Red returned to the camp, and the trail cutter was approaching from a different angle, his gaze fixed on the Pawnee half-breed. When within a hundred yards of the tent Hopalong said something to Red and rode eastward as if to meet the trail cutter, but he circled the camp and came in from the opposite side.

"'Nother ruckus, Kid?" asked Hopalong, smiling at Mesquite's freshly punished face. "Oughta give one batch of bruises time to heal before startin' a second crop." He then noticed the countenance of the sullen parson and reproved the youth. "Parsons oughta be barred, Kid."

"I was teachin' him poker. Take a look at th' cards," retorted Mesquite, then scowled frankly at the trail cutter, whose snort of mirth was startling.

Hopalong examined the cards, and then looked at the battered parson.

"This yore work?" he asked, holding out several of them.

"None of yore damn business!" snapped the parson, his language being duly noted by those present.

Hopalong laughed. "It was my business as soon as I shook hands with you. Yore soft finger tips might 'a' been excused in a parson; but that sharp, pointed thumb nail was too much." He glanced at the ground and then eastward along it. "Struck me as bein' peculiar that anybody could bust a wagon wheel right here. Th' tracks showed that you come in here on four wheels an' made things look right for you; but take a look at them busted spokes, an' you can easy see they was busted a long time ago. Th' breaks are old, frayed, weather-stained an' full of dust. Just what's yore game, stranger?"

"None of yore damn business!"

"I made some of it my business when I circled th' camp just now," replied Hopalong. "A wagon wheel's right heavy, but it's got to be carried a short distance not to leave no tracks in camp. After that you rolled it, an' I found it, couple hundred yards south, covered with weeds an' grass. If yo're a parson, I'm Gabriel. I figgered you was a card sharp, an' reckoned I'd give you time to warm up to th' Kid. How'd you come to pick out this lonesome spot for yore camp? Layin' for trail outfits before they got to town?"

"None of yore damn business!"

The trail cutter laughed and edged into the conversation.

"He picked this because th' Republican was bank-full

an' he counted on trail crews bein' water bound. He crossed it just before it rose. He's Helena Joe, an' his 'wife' is Angel Face Nannie, of th' same town. He's a tin horn, an' she's a confidence expert. They was chased outa Helena, Laramie an' Cheyenne. Then they got chased outa Ogallala an' figgered on goin' down to Dodge. They've worked this busted wagon trick all along th' way. All of which ain't interestin' me none a-tall; but what *is* interestin' me is why this Pawnee is hangin' round here, an' where him an' his friends has been gettin' likker. I'm aimin' to take a good look in that wagon, or watch it pull out, headed south, inside a half hour. If I find any likker in it I'm aimin' to let hell loose hereabouts; an' if th' wagon goes south an' stops inside half a day's good travellin', I also aim to let hell loose. What you say, Joe?"

Helena Joe said nothing. He arose and plodded south from the camp. When he returned he was rolling a perfectly good wagon wheel ahead of him. In silence he exchanged it for the broken wheel while his companions held up the corner of the wagon. In silence he put the broken wheel inside, under the canvas. In silence he helped Angel Face Nannie strike the tent and load it and the rest of their outfit into the wagon. In silence they helped hitch up the team which Red and the trail cutter drove in; and in silence were about to depart.

"Just a minute, parson," said Mesquite, walking up to the wagon, his Colt held loosely in his hand. "Money won by cheatin' don't stick. Fork over, *pronto*, or I'll turn hell loose, right through that corner of th' wagon,

that's so heavy." A movement caught his eye and he glanced around at Red, who was advancing with a tin cup in his hand and a grin on his hopeful face.

"Shoot!" said Red. "I'm ready, an' thirsty."

Mesquite took the money from the driver of the wagon, counted it, nodded, and with the others watched the prairie schooner wend its way southward at a speed not ordinarily obtained or desired from those vehicles.

"Cussed if I ain't a sucker!" he muttered.

"We all are, one way or t'other," replied Hopalong cheerfully.

"You shore oughta know," said Red, and tossed the tin cup against a pack sack.

CHAPTER XIV

A CHANGE IN PLAN

HOPALONG CASSIDY and his two friends had broken camp on the Stinking Water. They had ridden nearly seven hundred miles and had been more than a month on the way. During this time Hopalong had taught Mesquite Jenkins all that he could teach him; he had watched the youth react on the shifting environment and endeavour to hold in check a certain ferocity which was part of his nature; had seen him, at Dodge, express the stolen money to its rightful owner.

During these days in the saddle Hopalong had sensed an unaccountable restraint in the youth, and had wondered at it. He had only to look in Mesquite's eyes to see adoration, but, neverthless, he felt a nameless barrier which he believed was going to interfere with his plans. Now he believed that he knew what caused it: the youth was a one-man man and was unduly restrained by the presence of a third person.

This morning it was Mesquite's turn to wrangle in the horses, and after he had gone off to get them, Hopalong turned to Red, his old-time friend.

"He's a good kid, Red," he said, his eyes warming: "You've noticed that I'm pushin' him more an' more in th' lead? Couple more months an' he'll be fit to turn loose to rustle on his own."

"Couple more months!" exclaimed Red. He looked accusingly at his friend. "Don't you know my fambly ain't seen me for a *year?*"

"Gosh! That's right!" replied Hopalong, uncomfortably, for he was responsible for this state of affairs. He considered a moment. "Huh! Why don't you throw in with some trail outfit bound up th' North Fork, an' wait for us at th' ranch?"

Red grinned. "I been thinkin' about that," he confessed.

"Then do it," responded his friend. "You cut loose from us at Ogallala an' let me an' th' Kid ramble a little longer."

"Reckon I will. I like th' Kid, but we ain't never goin' to get real thick. He's too cussed cold."

"That's th' way he's got to stay," replied Hopalong. "Nobody can bust his heart, then." He looked at the ashes of the fire, and thought of the ashes of his own hopes and affections. "Red, I'm gettin' old; an' I'll soon be quittin' th' war-path."

Red snorted indignantly. "You Flathead, you ain't old!"

"There's only one thing's kept me alive all these years, an' that's th' speed of my gun hand; that an' not havin' no nerves. I've topped th' divide an' my speed's shore goin' to slow down. You tell Buck I'll be home one of these days, to ride range an' play with th' kids. Life ain't only a question of years; it's what's crowded into 'em. There's shore been a-plenty crowded into mine."

"I'm whistlin' there has," replied Red. He chuckled

knowingly. "So yo're goin' to turn yoreself out to grass for th' rest of yore life? You make me laugh!"

"Easy," warned his friend. "Here comes th' Kid. Did you ever see anythin' so damned dangerous in all yore days? Even th' way he walks is a warnin'."

"Yes, I have! Hopalong Cassidy!" snorted Red.

"You don't get th' idear at all, Red," said his friend, rising.

The pack animals loaded and their ropes in Hopalong's hand, the three rode from the camp and then Hopalong suddenly cried: "Hallelujah!" and watched with critical eyes.

At the word Mesquite's hand disappeared momentarily and became shrouded by smoke, his other hand a blur at the hammer of his gun. An empty can near the abandoned camp fire did strange things and finally rolled down the bank into the river.

Although he had seen this performance many times in the last month it was of such a nature that it would never fail to hold Red's interest. He swore gently under his breath and turned to exchange glances with his delighted friend. Hopalong's expression ironed out swiftly and he nodded casually to the expectant marksman.

"Purty good, Kid," he said; "but you'll do better'n that with more practice," and in his heart he asked forgiveness for the lie. No man living could fan a Colt better than that, or as good and the Kid could not improve upon perfection.

"What you goin' to do in Ogallala, Kid?" asked Red, dismissing this magic as if it were something quite ordinary.

"Dunno," chuckled Mesquite as he reloaded, and then his eyes seemed to flame. "Take things as they come, I reckon. I don't know anybody there." He pushed into the lead again and they jogged on.

After a few minutes Red looked back at the now distant camp and motioned to Hopalong to get out of range.

"Hey, Kid!" he cried. "There's a good shot—that can by th' ashes of th' fire!"

Mesquite's hand reached under his thigh as his horse leaped off the trail, came out and up with a rifle in it and fired almost as the heavy weapon settled against his shoulder. The range was long and unknown and the youth had taken no time to estimate it in terms of yards or to set the sights. He slid a fresh cartridge into the smoking breech and peered through the thinning smoke cloud.

"Damn purty, if you asks *me!*" grunted Red, his eyes shining with the pride of the teacher.

"Fair. Nobody *asked* you, Carrot Top!" snapped Hopalong, and rode on, following the youthful sharpshooter. He glanced at Red and grinned apologetically, and received a grin in reply.

"Why a couple more months, Hoppy?" asked Red in a low voice, but at his companion's quick shake of the head he said nothing more.

They pushed out on the dry stretch between the Stinking Water and the South Fork of the Platte, and in the afternoon they saw a great dust cloud ahead of them, rising high in the air. Out of sight to the north of them plodded and grazed a trail herd bound, perhaps,

for Ogallala, where the great trunk trail split into smaller and diverging ones, which led fanwise into all that northern country.

"That's a good sign," said Hopalong. "I'm glad to find th' trail still alive on my last trip over it."

"Yes," growled Red. "It's still alive, but not much more. Time was when you could see their sign in th' sky, front *an'* back, anywhere along it. It's on its last laigs."

Hopalong nodded sadly. "It's time for us old-timers to set in front of th' bunk house an' whittle toys—for other peoples' kids!" He glanced at Red. "*Cold* is th' way to *stay*, Red!"

At last they came up to the drag of sore-footed and sick cattle, almost hidden in the dust of their stronger fellows. The drag man saluted them.

"How far back did you pass th' last herd?" he called.

"On th' Mulberry," laughed Red. "You ain't findin' it crowded *this* year!"

"No; but we're throwin' off th' trail every time we stop."

"That ain't nothin' but habit," said Hopalong. "There ain't nothin' close enough to you to stampede an' pick you up."

"Why don't you trim this hospital?" asked Red. "It's holdin' you up. A herd can't travel no faster than its drag."

"New owner wants every hoof across th' South Fork," answered the drag man.

"Herd change hands on th' way up?" asked Mesquite.

"Shore did. We kiss it good-by at Ogallala, an' I

jump th' cars for home," said the drag man, grinning. "Me an' th' wrangler are cuttin' loose th' other side of th' Platte. Say hello to him when you go past; he'll be plumb glad to see you." He burst out laughing, and hastened to explain it. "He's got a couple of bad mares in th' caveyh, an' they've been raisin' hell ever since we started. Sometimes it takes near as many of us to round up th' saddle stock as it does to trail th' herd. He'll offer to swap them mares with you; been tryin' to swap 'em off all th' way up."

"Don't want 'em," replied Hopalong. "When a mare's mean, she's mean as hell. Where'd they foal their first colts?"

"Down Goliad way," answered the drag man, smiling, for he knew the reason for that question.

"Then they'll head back for Goliad," said Red. "Why don't you hobble 'em?"

"Their laigs is so raw an' burned from hobbles right now that they fight like th' devil when they see a short rope. Ride over an' tell Jim Campbell to try hobbles on 'em!"

Jim Campbell, a huge bulk of a man, had been arguing with a mare-cursed and hard-ridden caveyh for many weary days, and he had lost all belief in a beneficent Providence; but now his almost chronic depression was growing lighter, for toward him rode three innocent and unsuspecting pilgrims. Another day would end his connection with the outfit and he would be rid of the caveyh, but he had sworn to get rid of the two mares and he was going to try it. Truly the Lord had great patience with a sinner.

"Hello, strangers!" he called in a voice booming with friendliness. "Feel like swappin' cayuses to pass th' time away?"

"Not for no mares that foaled their first colts down in Texas," answered Hopalong, grinning. "Yore caveyh shore has made hist'ry on th' old trail. Them mares are famous."

"Now I shore will quit when I get to Ogallala," swore the wrangler. "It's on me, boys; I'm buyin' if we meet in town."

The trail pilgrims went on their way again, passing the restless herd. The cattle were scattered and pushing ahead doggedly, hardly taking the time to graze, becoming more and more irritable and mean. Covered with dust, their lolling tongues telling of their mounting thirst, they plodded on in the haze of their own making, here and there a dissatisfied and querulous bawl sounding above the petulant lowing. An hour later the three riders saw a horseman loping toward them down the trail and he raised his hand in greeting.

"What you find ahead?" called Hopalong.

"Not a hoof this side of th' river, except some range cattle," answered the trail boss. "Our bunch shore will rush that water when they scent it, an' I wasn't goin' to have no herd ahead of us to make us spend half a day cuttin' th' two apart again. Thought I was goin' home from Ogallala, but th' new owner met me this side of th' river an' said all but two of his trail crew went on a big drunk in town an' got so mean he had to fire 'em. He fixed things with my boss by wire, an' like a fool I agreed to take th' herd through for him."

"All yore men goin' to stick with you?" asked Red.

"Reckon all but Jim Campbell, an' Billy of th' drag. You fellers headin' up through th' Dakotas?"

"Mussleshell," answered Hopalong.

"Well, if all th' rest of th' boys stick, it'll be all right. So long."

At last the trail pilgrims looked down into the valley of the South Platte and saw Ogallala sprawled on the farther bank.

"There she is," said Red. "Toughest town in th' country to-day; wild as hell and twice as mean. There ain't nothin' can't happen in Ogallala."

"We ain't hangin' up no guns over there," said Hopalong. "Take a good look at her, Kid; a distant view of *that* town is allus th' best. Come on."

They rode down the slope, crossed the old trail running through the narrow bottoms parallel with the river, and then paused to look back at it.

This was the trail by whose aid Oregon and California had been settled, and along which had travelled the picturesque stages and the great overland movement to the gold diggings of "Western Kansas." For two years Pony Express riders had dashed along this highway, passing the plodding freight outfits and the rocking stages. The valley of the South Platte had seen a vast migration. It marked a magnificent epoch in the development of the West, and is paralleled in the history of no other nation or race.

Here was a natural wagon road, and its deeply worn ruts outlived the traffic that made them by more than a generation. In the year that General Johnston's

army taught the Mormons at least to show respect for the United States government, sixteen million pounds of government freight alone passed over this old trail, carried in thirty-five hundred wagons and drawn by more than forty thousand oxen; and this represented only the operations of one freighting company over the trail. The great wagon trains, of twenty-five vehicles each, plodded along with but a few miles between them, and made an unbroken procession across the plains that kept the air continually filled with dust.

The pilgrims forded the wide, shallow river without incident, turned off the trail a few hundred yards and entered Ogallala, silent and somnolent in the hot afternoon sun. As they looked back across the stream they saw the trail herd flowing down the gentle bluffs of the south side, faster and faster as the water lured them, the dust soaring aloft in the heat-quivering air. The animals waded out to stand in the water and soak themselves for a while before they drank.

"Got a few more houses since I was here last," remarked Hopalong as they came to the main street. "We'll arrange for stablin', get rid of th' animals, an' go down to th' river an' have a swim, if we can find a place deep enough."

"She reminds me of a strip of canvas," chuckled Mesquite; "plenty wide, but not very thick. I'll bet there's places where you can ford her without gettin' yore stirrups wet."

They found a livery stable and put up their horses. Hopalong and Red shook out their saddle blankets and threw them over a rope outside, to dry and freshen in

the sun and air. Mesquite tossed his on a box just inside the big door and started to leave the building; but Hopalong glanced in and stopped him, pointing to the lumped-up blanket.

"That's no way to leave a sweat-soaked blanket, Kid," he said sternly. "If you got to abuse somethin', abuse yoreself; but dry out yore saddle pad an' take th' best care you can of yore cayuse. That's th' whole of a horseman's book, an' you ain't nothin' *but* a horseman."

"Thinkin' of that swim made me plumb forget," replied Mesquite quietly, picking up the blanket and spreading it out along the line. He felt no rancor, for he knew that the rebuke was merited. To square himself he offered a suggestion. "Let's fork th' cayuses bareback, give 'em a soakin', an' let 'em roll in th' dry sand till they can't roll no more."

"You've named it proper, Kid," chuckled Red with apparent satisfaction. "I was wonderin' what was th' good of walkin' all that distance when we could just as well ride. You got a head on yore shoulders."

Hopalong glanced at the near-by river, estimated the distance, and snorted. "Too bad about yore pore, bow laigs, Carrot Top! Come on; get th' cayuses, an' th' ropes."

CHAPTER XV

OGALLALA GIVES WELCOME

WITH the coming of night Ogallala awakened. Saloon, dance hall and gambling house grew well lighted, noisy and crowded. Riders from the surrounding ranges came in, members of trail crews left their herds on the chosen waters under others of their outfit, and hied themselves eagerly to town. Money burned in their pockets and thirst burned in their throats. The herd which Hopalong and his friends had seen rolling down to the South Fork had been pushed across the river, across the narrow neck of land and on across the North Fork, to bed down not far from the latter stream.

With the exception of Billy of the drag, and Jim Campbell of the caveyh, the same crew would sing its lullabies night after night all the way across the great ranges of the Dakotas. The trail boss had denied his men the privilege of visiting the town, bribing them with boxes of cigars and a few bottles of liquor, the latter to be given out under proper supervision; for he knew that sprees in town meant careless herding and the abuse of riding stock; and if an army travels on its stomach, then a trail herd travels on the condition of its saddle animals.

Jim Campbell and Billy of the drag, with money in their pockets, and accompanied by a companion who

was to take back their horses, waved an ironic farewell to the grazing herd, and with a whoop whirled about again to ford the North Fork of the Platte and race to town. At the outskirts of Ogallala they shook hands with their disgusted companion, shouldered under their saddles, picked up their rifles, and turned to enjoy their freedom. In the first bar they became properly edged and ambitious, and after a supper of ham and eggs, thrice repeated, they admitted that the world looked good to them.

The cheerful pair killed time until nightfall, when the town came to life, and then they swaggered to a monte layout, looking for their favourite game. They were not spoiling for a fight, but only humorously inclined that way. They had come up the Long Trail, and were proud of the fact; they were both Texans, and were prouder of that; they had money, a thirst by no means satisfied, and they were going home.

As they made their way to the bar in the rear of the room, Jim Campbell bumped against an unsteady person on whose open and sagging vest hung a tarnished star. This individual staggered, crossed his feet, and went down, fumbling for his gun. As it came out of the holster Campbell leaped forward, jerked the weapon from the liquor fuddled fingers, and tossed it into the bartender's reluctant hands.

"Sorry, ol' timer," said Jim, helping the stranger to his feet and awkwardly brushing him off. "*I* got more laigs nor a cow, but *you* ain't got enough!" He roared at this quaint conceit and slapped the stranger across the back to show his amiable disposition. "Sorry," he

repeated. "'Tain't no shootin' matter. Come up an' have a drink with us."

Deputy Marshal Jack Deakin, mean at all times, but much meaner in his cups, sneered and spoke. His words dripped insults, deadly and uncalled for, and in the midst of them he swung viciously at the gaping Texan's jaw.

Campbell, surprised but holding no anger against a drunken man, avoided the blow more by good luck than by any conscious effort. He grabbed the deputy in his huge arms, held him close for a moment, and pondered what he could do with him. Deakin's language and his attack on the big man's shins suddenly exasperated Campbell, and with his first show of temper came an inspiration. He threw the cursing deputy across his knee, fumbled at the star, removed it and pinned it to the seat of the officer's trousers. Then the big puncher twisted the enraged and struggling man around, and, planting a boot heel just above the badge of office, kicked star and all into the street. It had happened so swiftly that it was over almost as soon as it had begun, but the roaring laugher of the crowd was echoing through the town before the befuddled deputy could get to his feet and slip away in the darkness.

"'Rah fer Texas!" shouted Jim at the top of his voice. He peered across the room and saw Hopalong and his friends at a table. "Hello, pilgrims! I shore got rid of them damn mares, an' for good! Come up an' drink to Texas an' th' trip home!"

Courtesy demanded acceptance of this invitation, and acceptance would link the pilgrims to a storm al-

ready brewing. Hopalong saw Mesquite start to his feet, a delighted grin on his face, and the older man nodded to Red. Courtesy had won.

"Hey, Kid, if anythin' busts loose, you take that lamp at th' far end," whispered Hopalong. "Red, yourn is th' middle one. I'll take care of th' other. There's trouble in th' air."

"'Tain't necessary to tell *me* that," growled Red, his eyes on the lamp; but he did not seem to be noticeably depressed.

The laughter at the deputy's discomfiture had died down, giving place to many dark and suspicious conjectures; but timid grins still persisted, for if Nero could fiddle, then these men should be allowed to grin; but apprehensive eyes were watching the door, and the prevailing air was that of expectancy. Jack Deakin was "bad," and to save his reputation the deputy marshal would have to return.

"Come along, boys, an' listen to m' tale,
I'll tell you m' troubles on th' Old Chisholm Trail,"

sang Billy of the drag, his arm draped on his big friend's shoulder. The chorus was prompt and came from all parts of the room.

"Comma ti yi youppee, youppee ya, youppee ya,
Comma ti yi youppee, youppee ya-a-a!"

Finding himself so well supported, Billy cut loose in earnest, and when the chorus came again it shook the house.

"It's cloudin' in th' west, a-lookin' like rain,
An' m' damned ole slicker's in th' waggin again.
Comma ti yi youppee, youppee ya, youppee ya,
Comma ti yi youppee, youppee ya-a-a!"

"We hit Caldwell, an' we hit 'er on th' fly,
An' bedded down th' herd on th' hill clost by."

Finally came the verse that many had been waiting for, and the noise redoubled.

"I went to th' waggin to git m' roll,
To go back to Texas, dad burn m' soul!
Comma ti yi youppee, youppee, ya, youppee ya,
Comma ti yi youppee, youppee ya-a-a!"

"Texas to th' bar!" yelled a leather-lunged man, pushing over a table that stood in his way. Half a dozen men pushed after him and he waved them forward. "Come on, Texas! Come on; *for*

"I've BEEN *to th' waggin' an* GOT *m' roll,*
An' I'm GOIN' *back to Texas, dad* BURN *m' soul!"*

Whoopee! Let 'er rip!"

Chairs crashed, tables slid, and the chorus was roared at the top of straining voices, to the time set by many stamping feet.

"Comma ti yi youppee, youppee ya, youppee ya,
Comma ti yi youppee, youppee ya-a-a!"

There came a sudden, high pitched shout of warning, lost in the uproar, and almost instantly followed by the flashes and crashes of a Colt from the street. Jim Campbell staggered, his knees buckled, but he pushed

clear of the crowded bar and fumbled for his gun. Like an echo to the second shot from the street there came three answering ones in the room, two of them sounding like one, and the lamps overhead went out to a shower of glass and kerosene. More flashes came from the street, telling that Jack Deakin had brought his friends.

Billy of the drag, hanging limply against the bar for support, and holding himself up only by a most stubborn will, felt a hand in the darkness and heard a friendly voice.

"Out th' back way with Campbell! We'll give you a start! Get a-goin', Texas!" The voice grew louder. "Red! Mesquite! *Hallelujah!* On yore bellies, an' hold that door!" and his last words were lost in the merging roars of a gun. spitting flame and lead toward the treacherous door.

Flashes lighted up the street intermittently, and more in the room blazed like huge fireflies, revealing a shrinking and milling crowd, made frantic by this hit-or-miss shooting. Commands in the name of the law, shouted at the top of stentorian voices, roared in from the street; and other voices, mad with fear and choking in the acrid and swirling powder smoke in the room, tried to answer. Jack Deakin had returned. He wanted the man who had kicked him, that man's friend, and whoever it was who had shot out the lights and denied him other shots.

Mesquite Jenkins turned to the man at his side, who had not moved since the lights went out, and who had kept his two guns full against an unexpected contingency.

"What you aimin' to do, Hoppy?" asked the youth as he deftly and hurriedly shoved fresh cartridges into his weapon. There was an eagerness in his voice that his friend recognized and deferred to; it almost was a plea.

"Anythin' you want, Kid! Turn it loose!"

"Loose she is!" replied Mesquite, firing at a flash in the street. The curse it evoked was sweet to his ear, and he shoved his friend away, and fired again.

Hopalong grunted with satisfaction and moved over toward an old-time signal of inquiry from Red Connors, who wanted enlightenment as to his further course of action.

"Stop that shootin'!" yelled somebody, and instantly his demand swelled into a roar.

There were shouts for a light, and for Jack Deakin to come in. He was given to understand that the room was full of his friends. A match was struck and the bartender arose from behind his bulwark, a reserve lamp in his shaking hands. In its modest light strained faces stood out grotesquely, every face near the lamp a gargoyle of fear. The uproar ceased as the crowd turned to face the door, and Jack Deakin and his friends came in with their hands full of guns and their hearts full of homicide. As they crossed the threshold there came another shot and the paralyzed bartender's yawning mouth was filled with kerosene. He was stupid with fear and stared down in the darkness toward his empty and outstretched hands. The crowd surged this way and that as other shots flashed and roared, Deakin's hoarse voice at times rising above the

tumult and threatening every calamity he knew to certain miscreants unknown.

"Git a lamp acrost th' street!" he yelled to a friend, shoving this person through the doorway. "Th' next man that busts a lamp is goin' to git killed!" he warned in quivering earnestness "An' don't nobody try to leave this room!"

There came a smothered laugh from the rear of the crowd, a chuckle from near the door and a snicker from the bar. The crowd tried to avoid these three points of interest, but could only leave one by going to another.

The enraged deputy started toward the offensive sound nearest to him, but some one unkindly thrust out a leg and sent him sprawling. As he went down he suspected that the leg had come from Texas. He arose, sputtering maledictions, which were not lessened by another snicker, and he headed, almost senseless from rage, toward this second heretic scoffer, his progress heralded by the language he was using. A bony fist came out of the darkness and glanced from the deputy's face, proving that some one's sense of hearing was beautifully correct. Deakin swung his unarmed left on a gamble, and the hubbub grew apace. The crowd, forgetful of orders not to leave the room, fought for the door, bucked through it and gained the street, to scatter joyously in the darkness.

From a saloon across the way, strangely deserted, came a valiant lamp bearer, shielding the flickering blaze with a cupped and tender hand, which filled his eyes with light and dimmed his vision. He had more courage than good sense, which he acutely realized

when the lamp disintegrated and left him shielding nothing but the sudden and rank odor of kerosene on his person.

"Great jumpin' Jehosaphat!" he yelled, and he continued to yell it as long as his voice floated back from the direction of the river.

Deputy Marshal Deakin was trying to shout with a rage-twisted tongue. He dashed out into the street, running frantically about in short circles, asking every man he bumped into if he were the guilty blankety-blank. He collided with a stockily built youth, shouted the same question, heard a snicker and then found that all the stars to be seen by man are not in the heavens above. Staggering backward he collided with another vague figure in the darkness, saw a new constellation and dropped into the dust.

When he came to his senses he dazedly noticed that lamps were burning brightly in the gambling house, and also that the crowd was now entirely lacking. How well he had them trained! They had obtained lamps and gone back inside to await his pleasure! He staggered to his feet and stumbled toward the open and inviting door; and stared hypnotically at the two bright lights on a table in a deserted room. As he crossed the threshold from the momentum of his start there came two more shots and he thought he had gone suddenly blind. Groping in the darkness and utterly bewildered, he paused at the sound of a gentle voice:

"Last time I saw him he was goin' crost th' level,
A-kickin' up his heels an' a-runnin' like th' devil!"

Whatever he had been before, the deputy was a berserker now. He fired by ear, as fast as he could fan his weapon; and he fanned it impartially after the last cartridge had been exploded. From behind the bar three men arose from a prostrate and terrorized fourth. They vaulted over the counter and made for the wabbling person silhouetted against the faint patch of light made by the open door. They reached this person together, grabbed him together, and together swung him three times and then threw him clear across the dark and dusty street.

"Bartender," said a youthful voice, "get th' deppity a light!" But he spoke to a tenantless bar, whose presiding genius was shattering all local cross-country records toward the open plain, and who did not care which fork of the Platte got in his way.

Deputy Marshal Deakin arose painfully and turned around three times before he knew what was up, or which way he wanted to face. Down the street wafted a gentle ditty:

"Stray in th' herd an' th' boss said, 'Kill it!'
So I shot him in th' rump with th' handle of a skillet."

Releasing the upper and heaving layer of his vocabulary, the deputy marshal turned to charge in the direction of this singer, but wavered to a stop as another voice sang another gentle ditty behind him somewhere:

"Popped m' foot in th' stirrup an' gave a little yell,
Th' tail cattle broke an' th' leaders went to hell!"

The peace officer wabbled about in a circle, got straightened out and headed for this latest infamy; but

from the dark and mysterious gambling house wafted another voice:

Comma ti yi youppee, youppee ya, youppee ya,
Comma ti yi youppee, youppee ya-a-a!"

A slowly moving figure, knowing the deputy's gun to be empty, came straight down the middle of the street, carrying something with infinite care, and turned into the gambling house as another slowly moving blot oozed up the street from the other direction, also carrying something with infinite care. It also turned into the gambling house. There came the faint radiance of a match, followed by a swiftly growing illumination as two new lamps were lighted.

A youth blew out the match and led his friends hurriedly and as silently as possible through the back door, where he and his companions stopped to look back through the opening. A silent room was a dangerous room, so they filled it with their voices from the door.

"I knowed somebody would get th' deputy a lamp," Mesquite loudly announced; "but where have you two mavericks been for th' last hour?"

"Huntin' a lamp," said one of his companions, also loudly. "Th' feller I took mine off of shore didn't want to part with it."

"Mine neither," said the other lamp bringer.

"Now we got to find th' deppity, an' give him his lamps," said Mesquite, his upraised hand balancing a Colt.

"I'd ruther find th' bartender," growled Red, who now guarded the vulnerable rear.

"Shut up!" whispered Mesquite, his hand going a little higher.

Deputy Marshal Deakin steadied himself, drew his gun, and vaguely remembered that he had emptied it. He reloaded it and then crept silently toward the brightly outlined door. Bending low when he reached it, he leaped through the opening and alighted, facing the lamps, his gun chopping down. There came three simultaneous reports from the back door, his gun flew from his hand and the two lamps disappeared along with their radiance. While the cursing deputy groped for his Colt three men raced through the darkness, around the building, across the street and behind the buildings on the other side, heading straight for the stable where they had put up their horses. Nearing this they slowed and caught sight of the glow of a cigarette out in the street twenty paces from the stable, where the stableman stood gazing with a burning curiosity in the direction of the firing, which still continued spasmodically. He neither saw nor heard the three men who entered his sacred precincts through the open door of the office, and became swallowed by the deeper darkness inside.

"*Uh!* Here it is," said Mesquite, fighting his laughter as he collided with the ladder leading up to the mow. He blundered up it while his two friends leaned against the bottom and laughed until they were limp.

"Come on, you chumps," called a strangling voice above their heads. "He'll be comin' back soon!"

"All right, Kid; all right," moaned a man below. "Gimme a boost, Carrot Top; I ain't got no strength."

The ladder creaked and shook and then became still. Two bulks dropped on the hay and shook the mow. Low moans filled the pitch-black darkness, to be finally broken by a weak, inquiring voice.

"Reckon Billy an' Campbell got away?"

Hopalong turned over. "We gave 'em time enough to get up to Fort Laramie."

"*Sh-h!*" whispered Red. "Shut up; I just heard th' office door close!"

CHAPTER XVI

AIMING TO BE ON HAND

A BEAM of sunlight filtering through a knothole rested on Mesquite Jenkins's face and he stirred restlessly, opened his eyes and watched the motes of dust dancing in the golden ray. With characteristic caution he took care not to move until he had located himself and become thoroughly familiar with his surroundings. His eyes and nose told him that he was lying in a hay-mow, over a stable; and then he remembered, and laughed. Turning his head he saw Red Connors looking at him, Red's expression being a composite one of respect, humorous conjecture and complete satisfaction. Red was not quite convinced that he was ready to separate from his two friends and go home by himself as he had planned.

"Ogallala's all you fellers said it was," remarked Mesquite, fishing for a boot. "That was a plain try at murder, last night; an' *him* a deppity marshal!"

Red nodded. "It shore was. There's shore different kinds of deppities, Kid."

"Wonder if Campbell an' Billy got to their friends up th' trail?" mused Mesquite. "If they didn't it shore ain't our fault."

"An' if they did I reckon mebby hell will pop hereabouts right soon," replied Red. He scratched his

head. "We ain't supposed to know nothin' about what happened last night, Kid. How could we, bein' asleep up here, all th' time?"

Mesquite did not accept the hint with any enthusiasm. "Mebby not; but if anybody comes foolin' around me lookin' for information they may start a stampede of trouble for themselves. Murderin' coyotes! An' *him* a deppity marshal! Hell!"

"Hell?" gently inquired the third man, opening his eyes. "Shucks, Kid; hell ain't started yet!" The speaker glanced at the youth inquiringly. "Of course, it ain't none of our business," he added, not revealing the fact that he would have made it his business, then and there, if either of the two strange punchers had been killed.

"Just th' same, my fingers itch to pull th' ear-tabs off'n his head," growled Mesquite. "Suppose it had been us? A man's got a right to have a fightin' chance for his life, ain't he?" He froze a little, remembering his own attempt to kill his present friend Hopalong, without offering a fighting chance.

Hopalong disguised the fact that the same thought had come to him. "I *like* this town," he said, chuckling. Mischievous deviltry danced in his eyes.

"Now what fool thing's millin' in yore head," demanded Red, scowling at his best friend, and recognizing disturbing symptoms. He suddenly cocked an ear and gave them warning. "Shh! Go back to sleep!"

The stableman, whose fuel box was devoid of cobs, put down the bucket and stopped, his gaze directed at a hay-framed opening over his head, through which

wafted gentle snores. Mechanically his arm reached out toward a pitchfork, and thus enweaponed, he cautiously climbed up the ladder. Three cow-punchers lay sprawled inelegantly on the hay. The stableman loosened his grip on the pitchfork and spoke loudly, roughly, impatiently.

"Hey, you! Wake up! Come nigh jabbin' this inter you. Figgered you was some of them railroad bums. You shouldn't 'a' done it! We don't allow it! You might 'a' set th' hull place on fire!"

Red blinked at him. "What time is it?"

"Time to get up! How'd you get in here after I locked up last night?"

"Reckon we beat you an' yore lockin' up," growled Hopalong. "Red, you got one of my boots?"

"Naw!" snapped Red. He squinted at the stableman. "Was that you fussin' down below last night? Do you allus lock up?"

"Yes. If you fellers was up here when I locked up, then you shore missed a lot of excitement," answered the stableman. "It sounded like th' battle of th' Little Big Horn."

"That so? What was it?" asked Mesquite.

The stableman told them about the shooting, but held back the most thrilling news to serve as a climax.

"There!" snorted Red indignantly, glaring at his friend Hopalong. "I told you we'd miss somethin', goin' to bed so cussed early!"

"Huh!" retorted Hopalong. "We was a lot better off right up here. Gun fights in strange towns are good things to keep out of."

"You bet they are!" exclaimed the stableman. "They're good things to keep outa in *any* town. Two fellers was killed last night in that fight."

"Now I *know* we was better off up here," said Hopalong emphatically. "Who got killed?"

"Big cow-puncher an' his friend," eagerly explained the stableman. "Both of 'em come to town from a drive outfit on th' trail. Th' big feller must 'a' been hit hard, right there in the room, because he was seen to stagger before th' lights went out. Folks figger his friend tried to drag him to a hoss an' get him away. Made it, too; but they *both* was hard hit, an' fell outa th' saddle just this side of th' trail. They was found locked in each other's arms, first thing this mornin'. I ain't heard th' hull of it yet, but I allus have known that Jack Deakin's plumb bad with a short gun—a reg'lar wizard!"

"Is he?" grunted Mesquite, his face hard. "That his reputation 'round here?"

"Shore! Everybody knows it," answered the stableman. "I ain't never seen nobody as could get a gun out, an' shootin', as fast as him."

"Then if anybody licked him in a gunfight, they wouldn't be accused of pickin' on a baby, huh?" inquired the youth.

"I should reckon not!"

"They musta been drunk an' lookin' for a fight," hastily suggested Hopalong, his face expressionless; but something inside of him had become brittle and frosty. It was more of a murder now than ever.

"Yeah; they picked a fight with Deakin, th' fools,"

said the stableman, feeling for a lower rung of the ladder. "I hear Jack's aimin' to go on th' war-path after th' fellers that shot out th' lights an' tried to help them two get away. If he finds 'em there'll be a couple more to plant. Cripes: th' lamps that was busted last night!"

"We shore was better off up here," said Red cheerfully.

"That so?" snorted Hopalong. "We wouldn't 'a' been up here a-tall if we hadn't drug you from that saloon! Don't you go to puttin' on no airs!"

"That's plumb centre," said Mesquite. "Now, let's eat; I'm near starved."

Red sullenly followed the stableman down the ladder, muttering under his breath.

"What can a feller do ag'in *two* like them?" he growled. "Wonder who shot out th' lights?"

"You shore ought 'a' be able to figger out a little thing like that," said a voice from above as Hopalong filled the opening and began to descend. "Their friends, of course. Who you figger it was? Settin' Bull?" He swore, and glared up at the third man. "Don't be so cussed fast, Kid: them's *my* fingers yo're steppin' on!"

"Then get a rustle on; I *told* you I was hungry!"

"*Didja?* Are you ever anythin' else?"

Red was walking with the stableman toward the big front door.

"What you think of *that* pair of sore-heads to travel 'round with?" he asked.

"I'd say Job was lucky; I'd ruther have th' boils," answered the stableman.

"Shake, pardner!" exclaimed Red, holding out his hand.

The stableman released the grip. "If you want to slick up a little, take it from th' hoss trough. There's a bucket, over there by that stall. See you later."

"Much obliged," replied Red, picking up the bucket and wandering out into the sunlight, which he found to be unpleasantly bright. After him rambled his two friends, quarreling apathetically, their eyes squinting in the glare, but their minds working along a single line of thought; and if the stableman could have known what that line was, his astonishment would have made him even more dumb than he was.

Their morning's ablutions performed sloppily, the three pilgrims wended their way to the street, looking for a place in which to feed their bland and innocent faces. This they found, and after filling their stomachs with ham and eggs, and their ears with the proprietor's account and conjectures concerning the last night's excitement, they wandered out to the street again and drifted to a stop at the first corner.

"*Nice* lookin' town," sneered Red. "Looks like th' mornin' after." He glanced around. "This ain't no place to loaf, on th' crossin' of two streets: a man can't watch four ways to once."

"I stopped here on purpose," growled Mesquite. "Let some coyote open th' dance!"

Hopalong smiled, and after a moment, wheeled about. "Come on; we got a big day's work ahead of us; an' we got to find *you* a job with some trail outfit, Carrot Top."

"I ain't in no pressin' hurry to leave this town," retorted Red.

"Yo're a fine fambly man," rejoined Hopalong. "How'd you know yore kids ain't sick, an' cryin' for their dad?"

"How'd you come to think of that *now*, after all these months?" demanded Red pugnaciously.

"Because it come to my mind! Come on; this town won't get awake till afternoon, an' meanwhile me an' th' Kid will help you pick out a real good outfit."

"I can pick my own, if I want to work all th' way home," retorted Red. "I'll mebby push right on with th' pack hosses—so them kids won't cry so long." He paused, and added: "Wonder if Campbell, or Billy, had any kids, to cry?"

Hopalong was covertly watching Mesquite, whose gaze had settled on a sign in the next block, which slanted crookedly out over the sidewalk. Its faded lettering proclaimed that it was attached to the front of the city marshal's office, and Hopalong nudged Red, who raised his eyebrows and then looked at the youth again, who stood rigid as a bird dog whose nostrils are filled with the scent of game.

"Aimin' to get th' job of deppity?" quietly asked Hopalong.

Mesquite stirred and turned a granite face to the questioner.

"No; but I was thinkin' of makin' a vacancy for somebody else to fill—that was deliberate murder, Hoppy!"

"Aimin' to take up another man's quarrel?"

"*He* can't take it up, bein' dead." The youth hesitated. "Damn it, a Texan oughta be safe *anywhere* along this trail."

"What you figgerin' to do?"

"Don't know; I mostly meet things when they stick their heads up."

"Come on, Kid; we'll find Red a useful job trailin' cattle, an' get rid of them pack animals at th' same time. Me an' you mebby will be in a big hurry to leave this town, when we do leave it; an' we ain't goin' to have no pack hosses to hold us back. Likewise, we ain't leavin' nothin' behind for those polecats to grab. Come on."

Red's expression was not at all beatific. He knew that something was going to happen to Ogallala, and he was quite confident that there was neither sickness nor tears in his family. He cast around for a way to get out of trailing cattle.

"A man hidin' behind th' corner of a buildin' shore can make a lot of trouble to a feller in th' open, Hoppy," he said; "an' a rifle's th' medicine for *that*." He was about to enlarge upon this theme, but Hopalong's quick frown silenced him, and he swore under his breath for his own benefit.

Mesquite took a long, last look at the slanting sign and turned with obvious reluctance from its tempting possibilities and then he thought of what the afternoon might bring and hoped for the best, or worst, the terms here being interchangeable, and he regarded his friend Hopalong in hopeful expectancy.

"Kid, yo're plannin' some kind of a ruckus," accused

Red, the light in his eyes belying the stern look of reproof on his face.

"Ain't plannin' nothin'," answered Mesquite, "except to be where I can be found easy by anybody lookin' for me. I just aim to be on hand if anythin' sticks its head up. He's a *hell* of a deppity marshal!"

"Come on," grunted Hopalong, turning again and starting toward the distant stable. "Come on, Red; yo're holdin' up th' drive."

Red sighed, pushed regretfully from the building he had been holding up, and joined his two friends, asking no questions but fearing the worst. They returned to the stable, paid their bill, and not many minutes later were jogging westward through the town after their plodding pack animals. The great trail lay close by and, turning into it, they followed it toward the North Fork of the Platte. Soon they began to see trail cattle grazing forward parallel with the river, the guarding riders loafing in the saddle, the chuck wagon getting hitched up for the day's travel. They rode close to this vehicle and stopped to converse with the busy cook.

"Goin' far?" asked Hopalong.

"Yallerstun. You fellers come up from th' south?"

"Yeah. Which way you drivin'?"

"Straight down th' Powder."

"See anything of a Bar W herd, or any of its riders?"

"Not since they pushed across the North Fork, yesterday afternoon."

"What herds are those ahead?" asked Hopalong, pointing at the dust clouds rising along the south side of the North Fork.

"First is a Mussleshell outfit with eight hundred two-year-olds; th' second, 'tother side of it, is headin' for th' ranges over west of Crazy Woman Mountains. We're waitin' for 'em to get further ahead, but they shore are slow."

After a few more words the pilgrims rode on at a smart clip in the direction of the dust clouds up the North Fork. The herd under the nearest cloud, blessed by a good rest, had no drag to speak of, and the tail man was taking life easy. Occasionally he started a lazy bunch of cattle up the trail, but he did this so artfully that the cattle did not know they were being driven, which proved the tail man to be a good cow hand. He looked around and saw the trail pilgrims nearing him.

"Mussleshell outfit?" asked Hopalong, and then he caught sight of the brand on the drag man's horse as it swung around. "Is Judkins with you this trip?"

"He's up with the left point. Friends of hissn?"

"Yes; see you later," and the pilgrims started on again.

"Look out he don't kidnap you," called the tail man.

"We're three men short," and then he looked curiously at Red, whose sudden curse came from his very soul.

Hopalong waved at the drag man and turned to grin at Red. "Yo're in luck, Carrot Top. Here's yore new outfit, plumb waitin' for you."

"Ah, you go to hell!" retorted Red, whose yearning for the town of Ogallala was growing by the minute.

Trail-boss Judkins was drifting from the point back

to the swing men, although he could have waited and let them come up to him. As he spoke to the last swing rider and started to go around the tail of the herd, he saw the trail pilgrims looming up in the dust. In another moment he was shaking hands with Hopalong and Red and had been introduced to Mesquite. Matters of mutual interest were discussed for a few minutes and then he asked the three if they wanted to throw in with him and go up the trail under pay.

"Now ain't that lucky," said Hopalong, and pointed at Red. "There's a man for you, Judkins. He's gettin' lonesome for his fambly; but if you take him you got to throw them packs in yore chuck wagon, an' turn th' cayuses into yore caveyh. Me an' th' Kid can't be bothered with 'em no more."

"She's done," chuckled the trail boss, and turned to Red. "Yo're takin' th' left point, Connors; that feller up there pushes 'em too hard."

"Wait a minute," said Hopalong. "This may make some trouble for you, havin' Red an' them cayuses. Ogallala posse may ride up an' ask a lot of questions. Lemme tell you about it," and he tersely explained what had happened, and certain blooming possibilities.

"Throw th' packs in th' waggin," said Judkins. "We ain't takin' no slack from no Ogallala bums. I'm short of men; an' I can buy cayuses if I want to, without askin' nobody in that town. Want me to send a man over to that Bar W outfit and let 'em know what happened to them two fellers? There's mebby somebody down in Texas would like to know about 'em."

Hopalong shook his head. "We're aimin' to ride up that way in a few days. We'll take what things we need from th' packs and put 'em in th' waggin. Watch out that Red's language don't stampede th' herd." He turned to his glowering friend. "Come on, Carrot Top; we'll get rid of th' packs an' then you can throw th' cayuses into th' caveyh. So long, Judkins; see you before snow flies."

The packs remade and stowed in the wagon, and the relieved animals turned over to Red, Hopalong reached out and slapped his old friend on the shoulder. "Tell Buck we're on our way home, but mebby goin' a long way round. Wasn't we lucky findin' Judkins like this?"

"This makes twice I've told you to go to hell!" retorted Red. He shook hands with Mesquite and then started the pack animals toward the grazing caveyh. A few minutes later he turned in his saddle and glanced back along the trail, where two mounted men were looking back at him and who promptly thumbed their noses at him.

He replied to their insulting signal and growled: "All right! You'll be needin' me an' my rifle before you get through with yore damn foolishness, you an' th' Kid." He watched them wheel and ride rapidly away toward town. "Kid," he soliloquized, gazing at the bobbing backs in the strung-out dust cloud, "yo're playin' leader in a couplet of calamity; but I know who's fixin' up yore line of travel, an' may th' Lord have mercy on yore soul! You've picked out a teacher that 'll keep you hoppin' like a bug on a hot fryin' pan; but I'll be damned if you could 'a' picked a better. Old

red headed, limpin' son-of-a-gun; there ain't no better in th' whole wide world. An' as for me, I'm shore goin' to be lonesome now."

Not far from Ogallala, Hopalong spoke to his silent companion. "Gimme th' tune, Kid, so I'll know what to dance."

Mesquite turned exultantly. "Hoppy, there ain't *no*body like you!"

"Which is a good thing, accordin' to my best friends; but what's th' tune?"

"Don't exactly know, yet," confessed Mesquite. "But it'll shore be a Texas tune, an' we'll be playin' th' fiddles. I'm figgerin' on *them* doin' th' dancin'."

"So am I," admitted Hopalong. "Well, if it's a Texas tune, I reckon I'll get th' hang of it with th' first note." He was silent for a moment. "Cuss it, Kid, I'm shore goin' to miss that Carrot Top. Oh, well—it's done, an' here's Ogallala, th' cesspool of th' long trail. I'll tune up my fiddle an' rosin my bow; though I don't reckon we'll need two fiddles."

"I don't know what I may get you into," growled Mesquite.

"Neither do I; an' what's more, I don't care. Here we are; keep yore eyes open, Kid."

CHAPTER XVII

WORTHY OF THE MASTER

JACK DEAKIN awakened around noon, unaware that he had killed any one, since no one of his friends had interrupted his morning's beauty sleep to tell him the news, the reason for this apparent lack of interest being a wholesome fear of the deputy's temper after what had happened the night before. He was savage in mind, sore in body, and venomous in disposition. When the marshal had turned the town over to him and gone away for a week, he had expressed confidence in his deputy's ability to handle any situation which might arise; and on the first day of Deakin's enlarged responsibilities he had been made a fool of—a ludicrous, asinine fool—and he had seen his carefully nurtured reputation turned into a thing of ridicule. It was likely to become a deadly boomerang, for he had plenty of enemies.

It was with dark thoughts in his mind that he drew on his clothes, and by the time he was ready to sally forth to get his belated breakfast he had roughly outlined his course of action. One boon he hoped would not be denied him—the return to town of the big Texan and his vocalizing friend. Having had his badge of office pinned to the seat of his trousers and kicked into the street while he was within the aforesaid gar-

ment, he was scalded to the soul by a steaming and corrosive acid. He fairly itched and seethed with ambition. Revenge and a tottering reputation urged him on, and he slung his heavy belt around his waist with vicious energy and stroked the sagging holster. Death would stalk through Ogallala's streets before night fell and shove its grisly visage into faces now wreathed with smiles.

Savagely eating a perfunctory breakfast, he listened to the news the proprietor of the restaurant had to tell him, and learned of the death of the two punchers. His satisfaction in this was tinged with regret, because now he could not use them for his spectacular attempt to bolster up his reputation. The words pouring into his ears suddenly enraged him. Would this fool never cease his senseless babbling?

"Aw, get th' hell away from here, an' shut up!" he snarled at the obsequious proprietor. "An' you forget that you told me anythin'; savvy that?"

As the humbled man retreated into the kitchen Deakin settled back in his chair and readjusted his plans. He would pretend not to know of the death of the strangers, and provide himself with other victims for the rehabilitation of his shattered reputation. Having made up his mind, he flung payment for the meal on the table and hastened out the back way, eager to hide himself from curious eyes until time for putting into execution the plan he had mapped out. Meeting a satellite, he gave the man a few instructions and then went on his way.

As the sun marked the passing of a hot midday the

deputy dropped his feet from a chair, shook his gun belt and stepped into the street, three close friends appearing from various points of vantage to loaf along behind him. He swung onward, unaware of the many grinning faces peering out at him from behind curtains and other places of concealment; and he did not sense the growing interest that the town was taking in his actions. Men appeared after he had passed and moved cautiously up the street behind him, their faces eager with curiosity and bright with expectation. Deputy Marshal Deakin obviously was on the warpath, and a good show offered, with admission free. Most of these men had no love for the arrogant officer, and took good care to hide their hopes.

In the gambling house, Hopalong Cassidy and Mesquite Jenkins were seated at the same table they had chosen the night before, hoping thus to make it easier for the deputy to find them; and they had whiled away the long, hot hours playing monte for small stakes, the elder taking this chance to give certain advice likely to prove of value to his young friend in this kind of gambling. Hopalong had said nothing of any plan to his companion, glad to retire into the background and let Mesquite take the lead. He was curious as to how the youth would carry it off, and he welcomed this opportunity to get a better line on the other's abilities. If Mesquite got in too deep and had more than he could handle, then the teacher would interject himself in his polite and well known way; but the remoteness of this contingency was such as to bring a smile on the older man's face. About them sounded a low murmur of

conversation, characteristic noises at the bar, and then suddenly a hush fell upon the room and a feeling of tenseness pervaded it.

The two pilgrims saw Deakin slouching in through the rear door, his hand carelessly swinging to and fro past his sheathed gun. His face was as expressionless as he could make it, and his movements were calm and unhurried. Simultaneously with his entrance from the rear, three men came in through the front door, called for drinks, and carelessly seated themselves around a table at the far end of the room. The deputy's attempt to disguise his feelings and intentions was well done; but the group of three lacked their friend's poise, and revealed their nervousness and keyed-up state in every motion they made.

The deputy paused, looked carelessly over the inmates of the room, and then advanced nonchalantly to the bar, flashing a swift warning at the bartender's change in expression.

"Tom," said Deakin slowly and clearly, "have you seen that big cow-puncher that was in here last night raisin' all th' disturbance?"

"No, I ain't, Jack," answered the bartender almost before the question was asked, whereupon Hopalong's eyes narrowed a little. "But I shore hope you find him an' kill him! Lookit all th' trouble he made!"

"Oh, I ain't aimin' to kill th' gent," replied Deakin graciously; "but I *am* honing for an apology. I'll even go so far as to force one. Seen anythin' of his friend that was so melodious?"

The bartender shook his head, secretly glad that the

deputy was hunting in vain, for he was still tired from his cross-country efforts of the night before; and gun-play in a room that he was in always displeased him. He was none too sure that the planks forming the face of the bar were sound all over.

"You got any idear who it was that shot out th' lights?" pursued the deputy, glancing up at the new lamps swinging from the ceiling. His voice was smooth and sweet, his face pleasant, but this fooled no one who knew him well. The bartender glanced furtively at a certain table, but sorrowfully shook his head, whereupon the deputy looked calmly at the same table and for some moments seemed to be considering something. Finally he sauntered over toward it and stopped when within two feet of it.

"You gents was in here last night, if my mem'ry is any good," he said to the pilgrims. "Got any idear who shot out them lights?"

Hopalong became deeply occupied in trying to recall the night's activities, and was running them over, detail by detail, the deputy waiting patiently. While he was searching his memory for the desired information he heard his youthful companion's voice, and he exulted secretly. The Kid was about to meet things as they stuck up their heads.

"Reckon it must 'a' been some friend of that big puncher; some Texan," said Mesquite as one who hazards an offhand and obvious opinion. There was no thought in his mind to evade any issue, but he cherished the hope of being able to string the deputy along for a while and get what pleasure he could out of the

angling. He grinned ingratiatingly, and he did it so well that his friend hugged himself in glee. "Personal, I was plumb glad when them lights went out. Us bein' strangers here, folks might 'a' made mistakes about us."

Hopalong nodded eagerly. "They didn't go out none too soon to suit *us*, an' we shore got out as quick as we could. This here town's plumb sudden, marshal."

"It's all right for them that lives here, an' likes it," retorted Deakin. "Where'd you go?"

Mesquite assumed the burden of the conversation again. "Down where our cayuses was stabled," he answered. "Hay was a-plenty good enough for us last night."

He chuckled as he recalled the night's episodes.

Deakin ignored the youth and was watching the older man, whose two low-hung guns acted on his suspicious mind like a red flag on a bull.

"You slept in th' stable?" he asked.

Hopalong nodded. "We wasn't a-tall particular," he replied.

"Th' hay was clean," growled Mesquite defensively, again trying to push into the lead.

"Listen here, boy!" snapped the deputy. "I ain't-a-talkin' to you; I'm talkin' to yore friend. When it comes time for you to horn in, I'll tell you!"

It appeared that the time was at hand, for from Hopalong's side came a sneering laugh, a nasty and contemptuous laugh, and the older man thrilled to what it told him.

"Listen here, marshal," said Mesquite calmly and

quietly, "I'm not talkin' to yore friends, but to you. I said that hay was clean, a cussed sight cleaner than some other things I can name; an' I said we wasn't particular where we slept last night, no more than some folks are in their shootin'. An' I can name one of *them* if I have a mind to."

An unholy joy danced in the deputy's eyes. "All right; I heard you! Now, then, make it plain! I never like to do no guessin'."

"There's more things than guessin' that you don't like," retorted Mesquite, an innocent smile on his face; but under that smile something was growing that made the room grow suddenly tenser.

"All right; yo're doin' th' talkin'! Now put a name to 'em!" snapped Deakin, falling into a slouch that made the onlookers press back against the walls and for the first time notice the smallness of the room. His eyes glowed and there came a certain cruel hardness about his wide mouth. Before he got through he would build a cairn that would put an end to deputy-baiting around Ogallala as long as he wore his badge of office. This youthful fool was playing straight into his hands.

"It's quite a story; but you might as well have th' whole of it at once," said Mesquite, slowly getting to his feet. His movements flowed with the deceptive laziness and smoothness of a rising panther, and far back in his eyes there flickered a pale blue flame. The effect of his ominous personality reached into the far corners of the room and gripped every onlooker. Even Hopalong, hardened as he was by years of experience

in just such situations, found something so deadly emanating from his companion that a shiver rippled up his spine and awakened exquisite agonies of anticipation. A clarion trumpet call could not have told him more.

He glanced quickly at the silent deputy and smiled inwardly; the officer was frozen in his tracks, scarcely breathing while he hurriedly, frantically plumbed these unknown depths so suddenly opened before him. A careless dancer, suddenly finding a foot reaching out over an abyss, could not have been more shocked. A distinct and wordy avowal of purpose could not have warned Deakin more thoroughly. There is a positive and chilling reaction throughout all the human species to the evil portent in the hunting howl of a lobo wolf; and something very much akin to it had sharply strummed on the deputy's nerves. Hopalong felt it and wanted to leap into the air and shout from pride and gladness; he had figured this youth right from the first look he had had in the youngster's eyes. The protégé was worthy of his master.

Mesquite's cold and venomous glance flickered to the three men at a far table, and a certain chilliness, remarkably localized and isolated, settled down about them. Like the raw dampness of a cold spring day, it seemed to penetrate to their very marrow and it made them suck in their breath as if from sudden pain. The bartender was a mass of gooseflesh, despairingly conscious that his legs would refuse to function if he chose to run; he sank lower and lower behind the heavy counter, a painful choking in his throat.

"You want th' fellers that shot out th' lamps last night," purred Mesquite. One could visualize the bristling, gray white whiskers of a crouched cougar, the wrinkled lips pulling back for the snarl, the hooked claws moving experimentally in the inclosing pads. "There was three of 'em that done that, but th' third man ain't here. He figgered he wouldn't be needed, an' he shore figgered right. *I'm* lookin' for th' human buzzard that murdered them two cow-punchers from th' dark. We're both goin' to get just what we're lookin' for. *I* shot out them lamps, and *you* murdered th' punchers. Make yore play, you——."

Deakin stood like a man in a trance, hoping that he had not heard aright. He had the courage of the average man, bolstered during late years by the glamour of his official position. He represented the law, he was an adept with a gun, and he had years of experience to make him confident; but when that prickling along his spine told him that he was face to face with a born killer the shock of the discovery made it necessary for him to readjust himself. Five minutes before Jack Deakin honestly could have said that he was not afraid of any man on earth; but now he found himself paralyzed in the grip of a sudden and humiliating fear, ashamed of himself and furious because of his stubborn hesitancy. And while he stood thus, fighting his greatest battle, the man before him sneered, and spoke again.

"Put up yore hands!" snapped Mesquite, his own hand not touching a weapon; and a pæan of joy rang through Hopalong Cassidy's consciousness.

The deputy, goaded to desperation, moved swiftly,

but found his gun hand grasped and twisted aside. A blow on his jaw sent him reeling against the wall, his assailant keeping even with him. While the dazed man tried to recover the use of his faculties, Mesquite's hand darted out and jerked the deputy's gun from its holster, jammed the weapon into its owner's hand, and released his hold. The youth stepped back a pace and stared intently into the clearing eyes.

"It'll shoot," he suggested in a cold, low voice. "Try it an' see!"

Hopalong thrilled; his protégé could read a man's nature truly and swiftly, and nothing more was now to be desired. The pupil was graduating with honours under the teacher's proud and affectionate eyes.

Receiving no reply, Mesquite reached out again, tore the gun from the deputy's limp hand, and jammed it back into the sheath. "Get out!" he snapped contemptuously, shoving the peace officer toward the door. "Get out! An' when you come back, you come a-shootin'—for *I'll* be!"

The deputy licked his lips and swallowed, trying to lash himself to the pitch of rage necessary to overthrow his fear and draw and face the issue, then and there, like the man he wanted to be, like the man he always had been; but while he struggled there beat through to his consciousness the loud, monotonous ticking of the big clock behind the bar, and it intrigued his thoughts and attention—*Tick-tock—tick-tock—tick-tock*. It was damnable. If so insignificant a thing as a ticking clock could take a man's mind from a willed course of thought, then his condition was beyond hope.

Suddenly Deakin realized this in his own way and it sobered him. He stood stiffly erect and walked slowly to the door, savagely determined to shake off this curse, to tear himself out of its grip, and to return like a man, up the middle of the street, his head high and his battle flags flying, to save what he could of his shattered reputation, and to save something far greater; his own confidence and his self-respect.

He turned and looked at the alert youth.

"I'm comin'—a-shootin'," he said simply, and walked out.

The three men at the table cautiously rose to follow their friend, their eyes glued on the deadly youngster who watched them; but it was a voice from another quarter that made them jump, and pause.

"Wait, you tumblebugs!" snapped Hopalong, on his feet and ready for action. "Just to show that I ain't lettin' this kid horn into somethin' that I'm a-scared to tackle, I'm tellin' you three to foller along about five minutes behind yore friend. Come a-shootin', too—shootin' at *me*. I owe this to myself so folks won't get no false notions about me. *Scat!*"

"You can look for us!" snarled the leader of the trio, his face working with anger.

"Don't want to *look* for you!" snapped Hopalong. "Want you all in plain sight in th' middle of th' street, so I won't *have* to look for you. *Scat*, you scourin's!"

Muttering, they shuffled from the building, wondering if they hadn't talked too much; and with their departure the ticking of the clock rang out loudly. A bumblebee blundered in through the open door, hum-

med noisily around and blundered out again; and with its passing the silence was shattered by the ironic *tick-tock—tick-tock—tick-tock* of the clock; and there was something about its measured beats that turned careless minds toward the intent consideration of eternity.

Mesquite slowly returned to the table and carefully seated himself behind it. The minutes passed unheeded while he and his companion sat lost in their thoughts. Finally Hopalong stirred and looked reflectively across at his reflective friend. There was a gleam in the older man's eyes, a look on his face, that together made as great a compliment as he ever had paid to any man.

"Kid, aimin' to kill him?"

Mesquite stirred, started as the import of the question pushed through his preoccupation and sank into his consciousness. He flashed a surprised and wondering look at his friend.

"Shore; didn't I say so?"

"Reckon it could be understood that way," replied Hopalong. "He deserves it; but"—he paused and watched his forefinger tap on the table in time to the ticking of the clock—"but, I was just wonderin'. Just wonderin'."

"Wonderin'?" repeated the youth, trying to solve this unexpected puzzle. His conjectures were flashing every way, like sparks from under a smith's hammer.

"Yeah," drawled Hopalong. "Wonderin'." He looked calmly into his companion's eyes. "Just wonderin', Kid, if he don't deserve more; he come here to kill two more strangers. Everythin' was set an'

primed. Bein' th' kind of a man he is, it's shore easy to give him more."

Mesquite's silence lasted a full minute before he spoke.

"Meanin'?" he asked, his eyes not leaving those of his friend.

Hopalong stroked the stubble on his chin in quiet reflection.

"Why," he answered, "when a man's dead his troubles are over. This deppity buzzard ain't never had as much trouble in all his life as he's got right now; an' it ain't never goin' to get no less while he's alive."

Mesquite sank back in his chair and let the clock tick on without opposition. What trouble did Deakin have now that was worse than any he ever had, and that would not get less while he lived? He visualized the man, his swagger, his conceit, the obvious attempt to bolster up his ruined reputation. So deeply immersed in his thoughts that they became to him like spoken words, the youth at last turned and looked into Hopalong's inscrutable eyes.

"*That* what you mean?" he asked, not realizing that his question in reality asked nothing.

"Uh-huh!" grunted Hopalong.

After another interval of silence, during which Mesquite found himself seeing over again an incident which had taken place between this man Hopalong and himself, when each had met the other for the first time under the eyes of mutual acquaintances, he smiled as a child smiles who has reasoned out an intricate puzzle.

"Think I can?"

"Uh-huh!" grunted Hopalong, and rose to hide his exultation—and the sudden stab of pain in his heart. This was the kind of a youth his own son would have been had he lived. He walked over to the bar and leaned against it, an ironic smile on his face.

"How much?" he demanded of the man behind the counter.

The bartender flushed and pretended not to understand the question. Damn this pair, they could read a man's thoughts, even after they were forgotten!

"How much for what?"

"For them lamps we busted," answered the smiling two-gun man, pointing to something behind the bar. "Gimme that paper you was figgerin' on, right after we come in to-day."

The bartender did not dare to refuse, but he passed the evidence over with the most obvious reluctance. Why hadn't he destroyed the damn thing?

"You made this out before th' deppity came in," accused Hopalong.

"Yes, sir!" replied the bartender. "Ain't had no time to go over it agin."

"Reckoned you didn't," muttered Hopalong, searching the frightened eyes before him. He glanced down at the paper. "Seventy-five dollars for th' lamps, five dollars for kerosene, an' five dollars for wicks shore is high." He passed it back. "Suppose you go over it right now, as long as you was goin' to, sometime?"

"Yes, sir!" replied the bartender, and he forthwith drew his pencil through the item of wicks, naïvely explaining that they had been used over again in the new

lamps. The kerosene was not worth putting on paper, and when he readjusted the cost of the lamps it was only after a most painful debate in his mind. Did the two-gunman really want to pay what they were worth, or was he looking for an excuse to make trouble? He gambled, put down the cost price as delivered in Ogallala, and pushed the bill forward again, and again reluctantly.

"Ten dollars," mused Hopalong, his hand slowly going into a pocket. "You savvy that mebby yore life was saved by them lamps goin' out? Oh, well; that makes it about right: bartenders are shore plentiful." He paid the bill and turned to leave.

"You don't *have* to pay for 'em," said the bartender, the money in his outstretched hand. "We'll charge that to wear an' tear."

"There'll be more'n that charged to wear an' tear," replied the two-gunman, turning to smile reassurance. "An' don't you let that money pester you; I'm figgerin' on gettin' every cent of *my* money's worth outa this flea-bitten town," and, glancing about the room, he turned and went out through the rear door. A wise general tries to familiarize himself with the lay of the land before a battle.

In a few minutes he came in again, found his friend as he had left him, and dropped into the vacant chair, sighing gratefully. Hurrying footsteps in the street drew his attention and as a hanger-on of the gambling house popped in through the door to sound a warning, Hopalong raised a hand and checked the words. He turned to Mesquite.

"He's comin', Kid."

Mesquite rose quickly, shook his belt and slowly sauntered toward the door. At the threshold he turned to speak to his friend, found him gone, and stepped on again into the street, smiling at sight of the crowd lining both sides of it. In the distance Jack Deakin was walking slowly to meet him, the sun-kissed waters of the South Fork sparkling as a background and outlining the deputy vividly; but this was offset by the dancing brilliancy of the river in the youth's eyes.

The deputy was staring straight ahead, but occasionally stole quick side glances at the row of eager faces which lined the fronts of the buildings. The whole town had turned out to be amused, and, perhaps, to see him die; and at this thought a bitter rage surged through him.

There came a murmur from the crowd just ahead, and Deakin's eyes flashed up the street toward the gambling house which had been the scene of his unbelievable disgrace. A stocky youth was emerging from it, calm, serene, confident, his gently swinging right hand brushing lightly against his holster. Deakin responsively changed his stride. The erectness went out of his body and he crouched slightly, favouring the right leg in his alert and half-sliding advance. He fought down an almost irresistible desire to draw and start shooting; but to go into action at this distance would be to reveal what he was risking his life to hide. His mouth was drying, his throat becoming constricted; there was an accursed faintness about his kness that he hoped did not show to the eager and expectant crowd. Again

there came a cold ripple up his spine. The youth was walking with a short, tied-in stride, restraining a certain eagerness now plainly to be seen.

Sixty paces—fifty paces: with his nerves in better shape Deakin could start shooting from here, and he was fearful of what might come over him if he got too close to the only man who ever had paralyzed his nerve; but it would be a palpable sign of weakness to draw too soon. Forty paces—thirty: and still the calm youth kept coming steadily, unhurried, unflurried, acting as if this were something he had been accustomed to do since childhood. Twenty-five—twenty: Deakin's heart was hammering so loudly that he wondered if the crowd could hear it. His hands were cold and the shivers were rippling up his back like a breath out of the north. This was intolerable, more than flesh and blood could stand! Eighteen paces—fifteen: the deputy's hand jerked to his holster, the gun leaped into the curving and clutching fingers with the automatic precision given by long practice; and then at a sudden, deafening roar and a bursting cloud of smoke the heavy weapon tore from his grip and spun into the air, to fall behind him.

Paralyzed by fear he stared stupidly at the spreading smoke cloud and the unwavering and ominous muzzle of the steady gun. He choked, gasped and, his muscular control returning spasmodically, he shouted incoherently and dashed at top speed for the sanctuary of an open door, through the building, out of it and toward his saddled horse outside the marshal's office. The crowd streamed after him, beholding their deputy marshal, hatless, riding like mad toward the smiling

river. They saw him splash into and across it, gain the old trail and whirl eastward along it, partly hidden in the dust of his own making.

Shouts of derision, guffaws of ironic laughter, ribald jests yelled at the top of booming voices marked the passing of Deputy Marshal Deakin. The disappointed mob streamed back to the street, its thirst for blood only heightened by this denial.

It saw Hopalong Cassidy loafing down the middle of the thoroughfare, limping almost imperceptibly, his gently swinging hands held slightly from the rising and falling holsters. His face was expressionless, his squinting eyes looking in the direction of the sparkling South Fork. Reaching a point halfway between cross streets he paused, glanced around and then stopped to await the appearance of the deputy's three friends.

Minute followed minute with agonizing slowness, but the puncher stood patiently waiting. The crowd stirred, settled into immobility, and stirred again, a ripple of movement running up and down it. A freighter stepped forth, snapping shut a huge silver watch, and flung his hand above his head.

"Th' time's up, an' *more!*" he shouted, and grinned at the two-gun man. "Pardner, you ain't got no playmates to-day!"

Hopalong turned on his heel and faced him.

"Reckon it's even up, friend; *you* ain't got no deppity." He saw Mesquite, gun in hand, pushing through the crowd, and as the youth stopped at his side, Hopalong rested a hand on his protégé's shoulder. "You

done that purty, Kid; couldn't 'a' been done better. I'm damn near proud of you."

"Aw, shucks!" muttered Mesquite, and looked up into the beaming eyes of his good friend Hopalong. "You shore was right, Hoppy; he'd be a *lot* better off if he was dead!"

CHAPTER XVIII

IDENTIFIED

WHEN Hopalong Cassidy and his friend Mesquite Jenkins first entered Ogallala they had known no one in the town; but when they awakened on the morning of their third day they had numerous friendly acquaintances and some enemies. Those friendly to them showed their liking openly; their enemies hid themselves and waited their time. The quality of the friendship of the first class was doubtful; but there was no questioning the sincerity in the hostility of the second, even though it had not dared to show itself by any overt act.

After a late breakfast Hopalong and his young protégé were sauntering up the main street in quest of something to help them pass the time, the former strongly inclined toward a quiet session of monte or faro bank, the latter too restless to sit before a table. As they went along men smiled at them or shook hands, passing the time of day in friendly fashion.

"We got a lot of friends in this town," said Mesquite, exchanging grins with a man across the street; but the youth's eyes, like those of his companion, were watching doorways and the corners of buildings. "I sorta figgered it 'd be th' other way, Hoppy."

"We got a lot of acquaintances, Kid," corrected the

elder puncher. "Among 'em there may be some friends. Don't you bank too heavy on a smile; there's all kinds of reasons that 'll make a man smile. One of 'em, that I can name offhand, is th' way you handled yore gun yesterday. You copper th' grins, keep yore eyes open, an' yore mind free from any set idears about th' friends we got in this town. Takes years, Kid, to tell if a man's a real friend—an' then you can be fooled sharp an' sudden. Th' only proved friends that we've got in Ogallala we're totin' on our thighs. Copper th' others."

Mesquite nodded. "Reckon you're right. I *know* we got some enemies. Wonder where them three are that wouldn't meet you a-shootin' yesterday?"

"Settin' in some dump tryin' to figger out a way to get our scalps without bein' killed. They shine better at ambushin'. What you aimin' to do to-day? Travel on?"

Mesquite shook his head slowly. "I reckoned on stayin' here a little longer, unless you got other idears. I don't want to be in no hurry to leave. Folks will mebby think we was scared of Deakin comin' back, an' had to sneak out. What's on yore mind?"

"Nothin' but my hair, an' none too much of that. I reckon one place is as good as another, for awhile; an', besides, we've stirred up this town till it's beginnin' to get interestin'. You ain't figgerin' seriously on that polecat of a deputy comin' back for another try, are you?"

"Hardly know," growled Mesquite. "Seems to me that he's like th' front rank in a stampede: he just can't

turn an' make a stand. He was near scared to death, Hoppy, an' I reckon his spirit's busted. But I don't want folks to get no wrong notions about us."

"His spirit's busted wide open, an' for good. You broke him, Kid; an' a broken man is a terrible thing. Ain't gettin' to like this town, are you?"

"Not exactly," answered Mesquite. "I ain't seen much of it while I've been here. I sorta thought I'd take a look around; that's all." He flushed a little, despite himself.

Hopalong caught the faint glow, and ran rapidly back over recent events, eliminating as he went over them. He thought he knew what was holding his young friend in town, and urging him to wander about alone.

"Lone hand proposition, Kid?" asked Hopalong, flashing his companion a sidewise glance.

"You might call it that," answered Mesquite, and wondered at his self-consciousness. He had never felt embarrassed in the presence of any other man—never cared what they thought about him—yet he now felt a desire to square himself with this man at his side, to justify his actions, even his thoughts.

Hopalong sensed this uneasiness and knew the reason for it, for Mesquite was not the first youngster he had taken under his wing. He glowed a little as he laughed.

"Youngsters in th' herd have to foller their nat'ral bent, I reckon, or they'd never learn nothin'. You can get a lot of knowledge out of books an' by hearin' men talk; but th' things that stick tight come from experience. Sometimes they leave a welt like th' blow of

a bullwhip, or a blister like th' press of a hot brandin' iron—but th' marks will stay with you, Kid, till you die. It's shore a cinch you can't learn a hull lot about wimmin from no man; and cussed little from wimmin. There ain't no two alike, an' there ain't none that acts th' same way all th' time. You can say to yoreself, 'Now, if I do this, she'll do that'—an' miss by a mile. Take that redhead, back in Dodge. She tried to peel yore roll from you, she fought an' she cursed you; reg'lar mountain cat, she was. But some bum will come along that she'll play square with, take his insults, an' go to hell for him."

"*This* un ain't like *her!*" defended Mesquite quickly.

"Hit th' mark plumb center, didn't I, Kid?"

Mesquite laughed. "You allus do, you old coyote."

"You want to copper that remark," hastily replied Hopalong. He stopped near a doorway. "I'm goin' in there, Kid, to see if th' faro bank game is on th' square. If it is I aim to enjoy myself; if it ain't, I'll enjoy myself in another way, an' I won't need no help. You chase along an' find out more about Ogallala; an' if you feel like takin' a swim later on, come back here an' look me up."

"Sorta seems like I'm throwin' you over, cuttin' loose from you like this in a strange town," growled the youth, torn between two desires.

"It won't be th' first time I've been turned loose to run by myself," chuckled Hopalong. "When I'm playin' faro bank I'm keepin' cases in my old red head; an' when I'm keepin' cases I ain't generally very entertainin' to my friends. You trail along, but don't forget

that it's a wise two-year-old that keeps its eyes peeled for trouble from th' boss mosshead of th' herd when he's aimin' to cut in on th' mosshead's fambly. So long."

"All right, then; but I'll be back in a couple hours for that swim," promised Mesquite, and he moved slowly and somewhat reluctantly up the street.

"I'll be waitin' for you," called the older man; and then he turned to reply to the friendly salutations of two men who had come up behind him. "There goes a blamed fine kid," he told them proudly, turning to nod after the departing youth, who was walking with his chest out and with a chip on each shoulder.

"Glad you think so!" replied one of the two with emphasis. "Yo're shore welcome to him. If I ever saw dynamite dressed up in a man's clothes, yonder it goes. Why, that kid ain't human; he's more like a damn wildcat! He showed me somethin' yesterday that I ain't never goin' to forget."

"Bein' a sorta dude, he's shore misleadin'," remarked the second townsman.

Hopalong laughed contentedly. "Keepin' hisself slicked up ain't nothin' ag'in' a man. He's a good kid if you treat him right. This here must be th' place where th' hotel keeper told me I'd find a square game of faro bank," he suggested, pointing a thumb at the door.

"Square as any in town, an' mebby squarer," said the first townsman. "Far as I'm concerned, I ain't O.K.in' none of 'em. They'll all of 'em mebby be a little squarer, now that Deakin's left town."

A horseman shot out from a side street, whirled his

mount sharply, and loped toward them. He saw Hopalong, and after an incredulous stare kneed his horse and let out a gladsome whoop.

"Cassidy! *Hopalong!*" he yelled, his face split by a grin. "Where th' hell you been all this time?" He arrived in a cloud of dust and leaned impulsively from the saddle, jabbing his right hand eagerly forward.

"Hello, Ben!" cried Hopalong, gripping the hand with careless strength. "Where you from? Where you goin'? How's everybody up at th' ranch?"

"Dog my cats!" shouted Ben, pumping his friend's hand in unfeigned delight. "I'm just off th' trail, an' I gotta go right back. Come in to see if there was a telegraft message for us. Can't stay a minute more'n I has to. Got a big herd on th' move, an' we're hard pressed for time. Throw in with us. We can use you. Where's Red?"

"Goin' up th' North Fork with Judkins. Shore you ain't got no time to palaver?"

"Not a cussed minute, damn th' luck!" growled the rider. "Got a stampedin' bunch of young uns, an' they've raised hell right along. Got th' stampede habit. See you at th' ranch this fall?"

"Yes. But wait a minute, Ben!" exclaimed Hopalong, hanging to the other's hand. "Which way you trailin'?"

"Up Fort Buford way, along th' east trail. Why?"

Hopalong spoke rapidly, telling of the two Texans whom Deputy Marshal Deakin had killed two days before; and he asked his friend to get the news to their outfit, since he was bound up the same trail. Ben

listened closely, asked a few short and pertinent questions in regard to the other outfit's destination, and then gripped his horse between his knees and loped on his way again, turning at the first corner to wave a reluctant farewell.

Hopalong grinned after him. "Rollin' stone," he explained to his two companions. "Puts in his winters up our way, an' his summers trailin' cattle. Reckon it's a disease, bein' trail crazy thataway."

The two townsmen who had just learned this stranger's name were regarding him with a veiled curiosity, and were filled with turbulent thoughts. There before them stood Hopalong Cassidy in the flesh! Hopalong Cassidy, three days in Ogallala, and only now, through accident, had his name been learned. Their heartiness expanded, a certain pride enwrapped them, and they glanced around to see if any of their friends were in sight to envy them their familiarity with the man whose name rolled back and forth across the cattle country.

Their interest in faro bank momentarily died; faro bank could wait until they had spread the news. They shook hands with this limping two-gun man, grinned fatuously, and hastened away. It was all plain to them now. Mesquite was no longer any puzzle; he was the adopted cub of the toughest he-grizzly that ever looked for trouble; and they found that they were making favourable allowances for anything he had done or was likely to do. Deputy Marshal Deakin knew what he was doing when he fled from town after picking on the cub.

"Great guns!" marvelled one of the pair.

"You shore named it!" replied the other.

Hopalong gazed after them, mildly surprised by their behaviour; and his gunman's suspicious mind flashed him an instinctive warning: when men got so scarce precipitately it suggested that they were getting out of a zone of fire. He backed against the wall of the building and let his hands rest lightly on his guns, his keen eyes glancing from point to point in search of some sign of the daunted three. Nothing happened. The quiet moments droned on, vagrant breezes lifted spirals of dust and sent them dancing giddily and briefly along the street. The sun blazed down, and the somnolent town lay inert and ambitionless. Then a head poked out from a doorway down the street, and was followed by three others. The owners of the heads moved out into the street, waved at the alert stranger within the gates, who was a stranger no longer, and went back again.

While their motions did not look like a warning, they might have been calculated to throw him off his guard, and Hopalong became more suspicious and alert. "What th' hell?" he muttered, and his eyelids dropped until mere slits gave him room for vision, and he delicately balanced himself on the balls of his feet, ready to jump like a cat. Nothing happened. The town dozed on.

He saw his two acquaintances bolt from the suspected doorway, wave at him, and dash across the street into another building; and a moment later more heads popped into sight, and then disappeared.

"They acted all right till Ben rode up," cogitated Hopalong, raising one hand high enough to gently scratch his unshaven chin. Then he grinned foolishly, slapped his thigh and went through the door at his side. As he became lost to sight a man sitting at one side of, and close to, a window in the building next door swore under his breath, drew back, leaped to his feet and hastened out of the rear entrance, his expression a composite of fear and amazement.

Hopalong walked over to the faro bank layout and smiled down at the dealer dozing behind the table, who was a hard looking product of a hard life. Being a member of the gambling fraternity, undoubtedly this person was more or less familiar with the names of its most shining lights. Hopalong pulled out a treasure, which instantly advertised the fact that it was among those present. Cimarron Quantrell, back on the SV Ranch, would never know how he had punished seven hundred miles of trail by giving his pet corncob pipe to the man he so much admired. The dealer's nostrils flicked and his drowsiness faded, but before he could put his sarcastic thoughts into words he heard something which checked him.

"Ever meet Tex Ewalt?" asked Hopalong, in his kindness of heart preparing to give this gambler fair, if indirect, warning as to how this particular game of faro bank should be dealt.

The dealer instantly transferred his interest from the odoriferous pipe to its grave faced owner.

"Shore. Why?" he asked, watching for the signal of the craft, and watching in vain.

"Great feller, Tex is. Taught me an amazin' lot about cards," observed Hopalong, filling the Missouri stinker with loving care. He lit the fumigator and sighed with pleasure. "Last time I saw Tex he was plumb rarin' for to get married."

"You *don't* say!" ejaculated the hard boiled dealer in patent horror.

"Fact," grunted Hopalong, puffing contentedly. "Ain't nothin' like a good pipe, is there?" He spat violently in reply to a gurgle in the stem. "Fact. Tex was th' *only* man that could deal double-odd without me ketchin' him at it. An' even *he* wouldn't try it on me very often. Feel like a game right now, friend?"

"My case keeper ain't here yet, pardner."

"Keep 'em in yore head, like I do. Make th' stakes small; I ain't aimin' to get rich, but just to pass away some time. But mebby you'd ruther talk until th' crowd comes in?"

"Oh, no; I'll run off a few for you," replied the dealer, anxious to verify the stranger's claims. He named childish stakes, Hopalong nodded, and the game was on. They played for three hours, talking between deals, and then the crowd began to appear. Hopalong pushed back from the table, loser by the few dollars he had "invested."

"In that second game, a little before th' hock card, I noticed they stuck together a little," said Hopalong pleasantly. "Dampness in th' air, I reckon. There was a jack I must 'a' lost track of, which ain't onusual, keepin' cases in my head."

The dealer's face did not change, but he was now

prepared to believe that this affable stranger had played considerable faro bank with Tex Ewalt, and played for instruction. The incident mentioned was the only attempt he had made to deal crooked, and that only for the purpose of verification.

"Yo're a good un, stranger," said the man behind the case box, smiling. "There wasn't no money on that play, an' I reckoned I'd see if you knowed as much as you thought you did. Now I come to remember it, you didn't bet on no jack to show, after that. How'd you know what card it was, not bein' able to see it?"

"Sorta had a feelin' that way," answered Hopalong, smiling thinly.

"You won't have to watch this here game no more Mr.—— *There!* I've plumb forgot yore name already."

Hopalong glanced around the room, caught many eyes turning from him, and heard the low murmur; and he realized that there had been no real reason for him to hide his identity.

"Cassidy's my name; most folks call me Hopalong," he said as he rose. "Me an' you'll have a real game to-night or to-morrow, but just now I'm figgerin' on goin' in swimmin' with th' Kid. He don't think much of gamblin', an' don't know much about it; but I'm recommendin' him as bein' a friend of mine in case he should try you a whirl." He made way for an eager devotee of the game and sauntered to the door, there to wait for the coming of his young friend.

In a dive down a side street to the west sat four men with their heads close together across a table littered

with glasses and cigarette butts. Three of them were the men who had failed to keep their shooting appointment with Hopalong on the afternoon that their friend Deakin had fled ingloriously from the town; the fourth had sat close to an open window and heard Ben Watkins greet an old, red headed friend who limped slightly and wore two guns low down and tied.

"We got to! We can't do nothin' else!" angrily exclaimed one of the three. "Either that or foller Deakin! That hell hound will hunt us out an' kill every last one of us."

"But what about his friends?" demanded Number Two.

"He's only got one in town, an' we'll get him, too; they're *both* goin' swimmin', ain't they?"

"You got less sense than I thought you had!" growled Number One. "Don't you know that near everybody in town is their friend, now that they know it's Hopalong Cassidy an' his side pardner?"

"Oh, damn th' town!" interjected Number Three with angry emphasis. "We'll get 'em in th' river an' then jump th' country. Jim's right, you fool! If we don't get them, they'll get us. You can take yore pick; I've shore made *mine*."

"How you figgerin' on workin' it?" asked Number One sullenly. "You *saw* that kid in action, an' you *know* what his friend is. It won't be like shootin' prairie dogs. I'm votin' to get outa town, an' get out *pronto*. Them two ain't human, nohow."

"They don't go in swimmin' with their guns on, do they?" demanded Number Three with a vast contempt.

"They'll likely leave 'em on th' bank, won't they? An' lemme tell you somethin': no matter how onhuman a man is with his guns on, he's just plain human when he's stark naked. You got th' idear *yet?*"

Number One growled sullenly and nodded. "Yes, I got it. Sounds all right; but I'm keepin' my cayuse right smart handy. An' you, Pete," he said to the information bearer, the fourth at the table, "better slip outa here th' back way an' act innercent as hell."

"My sentiments, prezactly," agreed Pete, and he was beginning to slip out when Number Three snapped a warning.

"You keep yore mouth shet cussed tight, Pete!" The speaker's eyes blazed with menace. "We ain't aimin' to play th' leadin' parts in no necktie parties. One peep outa you an' we'll get you, no matter where you go. Don't forget that."

"You think I want to swing on a rope?" indignantly asked Pete, his face paling. "You know what happened to Jack McCall after he killed Wild Bill Hickok, up in Deadwood, don't you? There's *hundreds* of men that 'd swing *all* of us for killin' Cassidy in any way but an even break; an' there's no place where we could hide an' be safe. You fellers want to cover yore hosses' tracks, an' keep ridin'. I'm leavin' on th' first train out, east *or* west. So long."

The door closed softly after Pete, and for a few moments the room was silent. Then Number Two stirred uneasily and glanced at the bar.

"This room's cold as th' devil," he said. "Give us three whiskies, an' move lively."

CHAPTER XIX

CROSSING BRIDGES

MESQUITE drifted to a stop in front of the gambling house and saw his smiling friend standing in the doorway. He suddenly became aware of the attention they both were attracting; and then found that it was his companion who was the center of it. Unconsciously his alertness increased.

"What's up, Hoppy?" asked the youth. "Did you bust th' game, or somethin'?"

"Lost a few dollars, Kid. It was just a friendly game. Ready for that swim?"

"Any time you say," answered Mesquite. He looked about him curiously and saw many eyes turned his way. "What's up? What you been doin'? Everybody's lookin' at you, Hoppy. Them three comin', after all?" He whirled at a noise down the street, and froze, crouching a little. "What th' hell's *that?* A parade?"

Hopalong stared with him. Six men were walking with ludicrous dignity toward them, and behind the six came a string of stragglers, like a weaving tail to a steady kite. A few dogs acted as flankers, ready to jump and yelp at the first hostile movement. The leader of the parade was smiling, and smiles lighted the faces of his important companions.

Hopalong moved sidewise out of the door and stopped when he felt the solid wall behind his back. Mesquite took a step diagonally from the wall, half sidewise and half forward, his forthright nature urging him to meet trouble before it had time to get set, and his canny brain telling him not to mask the fire of two thirds of the artillery, represented by the guns of his ambidextrous friend.

The parade stopped and the leader took a few steps forward, holding out his hand.

"Mr. Cassidy, as mayor I welcome you in th' name of th' fair city of Ogallaler. We are pleased an' proud to have you an' yore friend in our midst. Th' town is yourn."

Hopalong's eyes twinkled as he shook the outstretched hand, and he flashed a warning glance at his protégé, who was as warlike as ever and saw in the present moment a complicated plot to ease their suspicions and render them harmless. Mesquite had never attended a public function before or had a town presented to him.

"That's right kind of you, Mr. Mayor, an' you gentlemen," said Hopalong, shaking hands with his honour and each of the councilmen in turn. "It's right kind of you-all. Me an' my friend appreciate yore kind feelin's. Ogallala does you proud. She's shore a fine city."

Mesquite's appraising glances flashed over the false fronts of the one-story shacks, the piles of débris in the street, and the heaps of tin cans scattered about carelessly; and then became thoroughly businesslike, and

watched corners, doors and windows, with charity toward none and malice for all. Hopalong might swallow these oily words and grow careless; but his youthful protégé was taking no anodynes through *his* ears. To his mind flashed a remark made when they had pulled up on the other side of the South Fork and he had his first view of Ogallala: the town did look much better from a distance.

"Mr. Cassidy," said the mayor, "we've jest received a telegraft message from Hen Smithers, our city marshal. He said he was givin' up his job by wire an' wasn't comin' back no more. From that we suspect he must 'a' seen Jack Deakin. Howsomever, Ogallaler ain't wearin' no mournin' at its loss. Comin' down to cases, this here city would be proud if you'd take that job, Mr. Cassidy. Of course, you can name yore own deppity. This here offer is an honour which works both ways, an' we hope you'll mill it over good before you make up yore mind. We'll be obliged if you'll let us know by sundown. Meanwhile, gents, th' town is yourn; foller yore nat'ral bend an' enjoy yoreselves. We'll now adjourn to th' bar, gents, an' drink to yore good health an' to th' good health of yore friend."

"An' to Ogallala, its mayor an' its councilmen," amended Hopalong, taking his honour's arm and leading the way. Ragged cheers broke out and scattered the flanking dogs in sudden panic and the rush set in toward the free drinks, Mesquite uneasy with a councilman's arm through his own, which polite attention would seriously hamper a draw. He felt like a trapped bobcat, and quickly figured just what he would do when

the fight began. Mesquite was pleased and gratified by the honours so unexpectedly accorded to his friend and, by reflection, upon himself; but he walked with a springy step and was instantly ready to swell the census of Ogallala's burying ground.

The festivities having reached their climax, and started to become limp and soggy from too much celebrating, the mayor and the councilmen shook hands again with the guests of the town, became wetly sentimental, and paraded to the street once more, two of them on the verge of tears. During the excitement of the official exodus Hopalong grabbed Mesquite's arm and dragged his young friend hastily through the rear door, around the end of the building, and in the direction of the river.

"Good Lord, Kid," he chuckled, "did you ever see anythin' like it?"

"Yo're a famous man, Hoppy; an' th' marshal resigned his job by telegraft," answered Mesquite proudly. "What are you goin' to do about it?"

"Take a swim an' forget it, of course. What you think I was goin' to do?"

The South Fork looked very inviting as it slipped along over its clean, sandy bed, which was firm because of continued low water. A rise would loosen the bottom and turn it into a thing of treachery. In the main the river was shallow, being hardly more than a submerged sand flat, with bars separated by shallow washes; but in one place the current, during the last rise, had scoured out a deep if narrow channel, which in time would become filled with sand and lose its depth.

This deep wash ran parallel with the north bank and a score of paces from it, following the shore line until a little above a dense clump of willows. Opposite these it turned abruptly and ran shoreward, striking the bank at the willow thicket and was there again deflected toward midstream, where it shallowed rapidly and was effaced. Its course could be plainly marked by the deeper colour of the water, which was rendered opaque by the wind-driven ripples racing along its surface.

Mesquite undressed hurriedly, dumping his clothes in a careless pile on top of his hat and gun. He was a magnificent figure of young manhood, hard, well muscled, and with a breadth of shoulder and depth of chest unguessed when covered by his loose and ill-fitting clothing. From the shoulders he tapered sharply to a small, narrow waist, and his flat stomach was ridged with muscle pads. Hopalong had wondered at the youth's strength and hitting power, and at his endurance and speed; but the first time he had seen his protégé stripped he had wondered no longer. The youth was whalebone and spring steel, and the long, smooth muscles gave no indication of being bound. Without his clothes Mesquite's pantherish movements became striking and unmistakable.

"How'd you keep yore laigs so straight, Kid?" asked Hopalong, admiringly, having in mind his friend's years in the saddle.

"Used to hang weights to my feet every night," chuckled the youth. "My dad raised me to be a hawg drover, an' didn't want none of them to slip between my knees."

He did a cartwheel at the edge of the deep wash and shot out of sight feet first. When he came up he sported like a porpoise and nearly as gracefully.

Hopalong took off his sombrero, and on it he placed his belts with their heavy guns, to keep them free from sand. As he straightened up, the sane caution of a lifetime made him estimate the distance from them to the river, and then turn to look back at the town and at the sandy ridges intervening. The first day they had enjoyed a swim here they had made no enemies in Ogallala; now they knew that they had at least three, and probably more.

Mesquite popped above the surface and trod water, looking shoreward.

"Come on in, Hoppy! Gosh, but yo're slow!"

He upended himself, waved his feet in the air, and disappeared, swimming under water to the channel bank. Emerging, he stood up, felt the keen coldness of the driving wind, which masked the burning power of the sun's rays, and shivered a little.

"It's colder out than in," he informed his slow friend, and did a hand-stand on the edge of the channel bank, his head under water. The current sucked the sand from under his hands and he toppled over backward, struck the water with a smack and turned like an eel. Apparently he was as much at home in the water as he was in a saddle. His head popped out again and he blew violently.

"Come on in, Hoppy! What's th' matter?"

Hopalong grinned at him and began to strip, and he had one foot in the river before he found a plausible solution to his puzzle. He turned back.

"Hey! 'Tain't cold; it's th' wind! Come on in; it's just right for a soakin'!" expostulated Mesquite.

"It ain't th' wind that's botherin' me, Kid, nor th' water, neither," growled Hopalong, going back to the piles of clothing. "I just don't like to get so far from my guns. There are times when a naked man is sorta helpless," he explained as he picked up one of his belts and then rearranged the clothing so that it showed two loops of the other belt. After fixing Mesquite's clothes to suit him, he returned to the river, swinging the heavy belt as he walked.

Mesquite was regarding his friend with frank and grinning interest.

"Takin' *that* in with you?" he asked.

"I'm takin' it where nobody can see it but us," answered Hopalong, wading along parallel with the shore, where he would leave no tracks. When he reached the deep water under the willows he turned shoreward, leaned over and hung the belt and gun low down and well back on the sagging brush, where they were visible only from the river.

Mesquite laughed. "You shore cross a lot of bridges before you come to 'em, Hoppy. Ain't overlookin' *nothin'*, are you? An' how in hell did *yore* laigs get so *bent?*" His laughter rang out across the water.

Hopalong regarded him reproachfully, and grinned. "My dad said a hawg drover was only just one step above his hawgs," he retorted. "He wanted to make shore I'd never herd hawgs an' disgrace him. He hung weights to my shoulders an' made me sleep standin' up. What you grinnin' at, you eel?"

"At them freckles. You look like a bird's aig," laughed the youth. "How far can you fetch?" And with the question he arose in a short arc and shot from sight. When he came up he was well down stream, nearly opposite the leaf-fringed belt and six-gun.

"Yo're a fish!" accused Hopalong as his friend swam up stream, every movement full of grace and power as he went through the water at a speed which aroused Hopalong's envy. The older man had always fought the water, his strokes poorly coördinated, but this youngster seemed to find it his natural element.

"How far can you swim, Kid?" asked Hopalong.

"I swum th' Mississippi at St. Louis when I was fifteen years old," said Mesquite truthfully. "Old man went along with me in a rowboat. I allus could swim, seems like."

They swam and frolicked and enjoyed themselves thoroughly, forgetting Ogallala and all its inhabitants. They had gone up stream and were floating down with the current, side by side, when a sneering laugh rang out from the bank, and they turned their heads to see three men squatting in front of their clothing. Hopalong turned on his side and gained shallow water in a few powerful strokes; Mesquite simply went under all at once, like a stone. When he came up he was still above the three men and the piles of clothing, while his friend waited tensely where he had stopped. The youth moved through the water with scarcely a ripple, touched bottom and halted, submerged to his chin.

The faces of the three men on the bank were wreathed in evil grins, and exultant triumph danced in their eyes.

"Won't even have to bury you coyotes," gloated Number One with a sneering laugh. "Damned if this ain't funny!" He drew his gun and balanced it experimentally. "Why don't you say somethin', you with th' freckles? You shot off yore mouth enough yesterday!"

"Too cussed much," growled Number Three, flushing as he remembered. "You watch th' old feller; I'll watch his friend."

"I can look at dogs without talkin' to 'em, can't I?" asked Hopalong, his eyes glowing with anger. He did not glance at Mesquite, and he dared not prompt the youth, who had a hundred watery yards to go before he could reach the cached gun. Hopalong realized that he must attract as much attention to himself as he could, and now that his identity was known he would occupy the center of the stage as a matter of right. He sneered and walked slowly toward the bank. "What you aim to do, you buzzards?"

"Aim to make some buzzard *meat!*" snapped Number One, not able to resist this safe opportunity to indulge in a little cruelty. His gun moved deliberately and he peered through the smoke, hoping to see the freckled man wince; but he hoped in vain. "We're goin' to send you two driftin' down th' river, ballasted with lead." He fired again, with precise aim.

The shock of the first bullet, smashing through the fleshy part of his right shoulder, made Hopalong set his teeth; but he refused to flinch. The second slug grazed his side and evoked a licking flame in his eyes.

Number Three emulated his friend's example and

fired at Mesquite as the youth started forward under the unreasoning impetus of a cold and ferocious rage. The nervousness of the marksman, aided by an attempt to superficially wound his victim, scored a miss, and he fired again as quickly as he could pull the trigger; but this time his target was a flashing movement, describing a backward arc, and the bullet only broke the skin of the youth's moving thigh. Mesquite turned in the air, struck the water face down, and darted from sight with hardly a splash. Reckless courage would only sacrifice his friend Hopalong, and it behooved the youth to use his wits and the full power of his swimming ability.

"Watch that damned wildcat!" yelled Number Two, needlessly. His companion was already running along the bank, his upraised gun wabbling as the deep, dry sand made him slip and flounder. His curses streamed behind him, leveled at the sand, the hot sun and the missing victim.

"You stinkin' cowards!" shouted Hopalong, splashing forward again. He stumbled and went down as another shot roared from the bank and missed him. Arising, he swept the stringy, wet hair from his eyes, and stood still, again master of his rage.

"What Ogallala will do to you bums will be a-plenty," he said.

Number Two looked worried, but Number One laughed in booming derision.

"There's allus somebody down here along th' river, shootin' at floatin' sticks an' such," he replied. "By th' time yo're missed you'll be floatin' down stream an'

we'll be miles away. I could 'a' killed you th' first shot if I wanted to bust up th' show. I'm shore *enjoyin'* this. Get down on yore knees and beg, *pronto!*"

"Go to hell!" snapped Hopalong, and stiffened against the shock of a bullet through the outer side of his right arm. "That's good shootin', but it's plumb wasted in a coward. You ain't got no guts, you—— !"

Number Two was acutely nervous at the non-appearance of the missing youth, and was dividing his attention between the man up stream and the placid stretch of water below. He heard a shot, fired by his distant friend at a nose which for an instant showed above the water and then disappeared. There came a crashing of brush, more profanity broken by a shortness of breath due to the heavy going through the deep sand, and then there came a shout from below.

Number Two leaped to his feet and wallowed through the sand to go to the aid of his searching friend, who at that moment was forcing his way through a tangled mass of willows, swearing monotonously as his spurs caught on the interlaced and exposed roots. The searcher had gained the edge of the deep water and opened his eyes with amazement. Under his very nose hung a belt and a sheathed gun. Being in an awkward position, he grabbed the willows with his encumbered gun hand and leaned eagerly outward, his free hand stretching for the holstered prize.

From out of the mysterious depths of the channel there flashed a streak of white. It shot up and left the water like a rocket, and two sinewy hands fastened on the terrified searcher. One went to his throat, the

other fastened to the wildly flung gun wrist. There came a snapping of fragile stems, a thrashing crash; and then speeding bubbles streamed up from the watery depths to dance on the ripples before they burst.

"Jim!" softly called Number Two, pausing at the edge of the thicket as he heard the suspicious splash. "*Jim!*"

Again the white streak flashed up out of the baffling depths and broke the surface. An eager hand shot upward to the swaying leather holster, gripped it, yanked the gun from it, and pulled trigger as Number Two stared open mouthed from the thicket, his evil face framed with greenery. As the gun roared Number Two's amazed expression turned to one of vast stupidity. He pitched forward, face down among the sagging willow twigs.

Mesquite grabbed the willow roots, wriggled out of the water, and dashed at top speed toward the piles of clothing and their pop-eyed guard, who was staring unbelievably at this sprinting and deadly nakedness. He never had believed in ghosts, and did not believe in them now, which he proved by throwing up his gun and firing as fast as he could pull trigger, blessing the forethought that had made him reload his weapon after the shots at the up-stream man. The gun emptied, he dropped it and clawed at the pile of clothing at his side, dragging out Hopalong's other Colt.

"Keep yore paws off that, you filthy rat!" roared Hopalong, enraged by this sacrilege, and starting forward with convulsive energy; but Number One had no time to waste on an unarmed man. He raised the gun,

screamed slobberingly, whirled halfway around, tottered a moment, and then crumpled like a crushed puffball.

Mesquite lowered the Colt and glared at his still rushing friend, who had started his charge empty handed against an armed enemy.

"What's th' matter with you?" roared Mesquite, stopping in his tracks. "Tryin' to get killed, chargin' that way?"

Hopalong seized his undershirt and tore it into strips to bind up his bleeding wounds. "Gimme a hand, you fish!" he growled, but his face beamed with pride. The bandaging finished in silence, Hopalong began to dress. He had one leg in his trousers and was hopping about with the second partly incased when he burst out laughing.

"*Now* what do you think about crossin' bridges, Kid?" he asked.

Mesquite chuckled in his shirt, then his head pushed through and revealed his grinning countenance.

"Hereafter I'm aimin' to help you cross 'em, you freckled Rootdigger." The grin faded swiftly and an ominous frown took its place. "Who told them coyotes we was goin' swimmin', Hoppy?" he demanded.

"Th' whole town knowed it—that is, all but th' mayor!" chuckled the two-gun man, and then he laughed outright. "Kid, you shore used yore head. This town won't need no marshal if we stay here a few days more."

CHAPTER XX

A QUESTION OF ETHICS

HOPALONG, decorated with bandages, sat in the sun against the front of the stable, and, with disapproving eyes, watched a typical prairie thunderstorm rolling with incredible swiftness out of the southwest, spreading a twilight gloom before it. In the next twenty minutes the temperature was likely to fall as many degrees.

Hopalong's wounds were all in his right arm and shoulder. This might start a pleasant chain of thought in some hostile gun-toter. It is a fact that the majority of men are right-handed, and a conjecturing observer, weighing the wounds against the two guns of the limping redhead, would be likely to discount that left hand, and figure that its owner was sufficiently handicapped to render him safe picking.

Should this hypothesis lead to action, he would discover that the wounded man was by nature and practice ambidextrous, and really favoured the slighted hand. This contingency, breaking as it did in his favour in a town where he believed he had several enemies, rendered Hopalong easy in his mind and accounted for his light-heartedness.

His protégé poked his head around the door-casing and grinned at the injured gentleman.

"Feel good enough to leave town to-day, Hoppy?" he asked with a suggestion of anxiety.

"You honin' to go?"

"No."

"No?"

"I'm gettin' to sorta like this town." Mesquite's grin was frank and unabashed and somewhat impudent.

"So I reckoned, Kid," replied Hopalong, ironing out his smile. He glanced appraisingly at the nearing storm. "Better keep under cover awhile; you'll get half drownded if that ketches you in th' open."

"You aimin' to set around this cussed stable all afternoon?" asked the youth, discounting the approaching rain.

"Ain't hardly made up my mind. I can play crib with th' stableman, or go uptown an' wrastle with that faro bank game. It's run on th' square when I play. Don't you stick around here just to keep me company, Kid. I don't want to line-ride you, an' you can tell her that." He grunted. "Speakin' plain, Kid, without no offense to you, I don't think a hull lot of her."

"That's because you figger she's like that red head dancer, back in Dodge," replied the youth. "She's square, Hoppy; an' she's plumb sick of this town an' everybody belongin' to it."

"You make me sick!" snorted Hopalong, moving inside as the first heavy drops spatted down. "Square! Look here. She's mebby square with you; but lemme tell you she's a long way from bein' square with th' other feller. Seein' he's her husband, an' a hull lot alive, her squareness won't get her no prize. I've been

a cattleman all my life, where ownership is somewhat a matter of honour; but I ain't preachin' to you. She's a weak sister, Kid—damn weak! She's tired of her man, her life with him, an' with th' town. She wants a change. If she wants a change *now*, where she has real standin' in folks' eyes, she'll shore want another change later on. Wait a minute: don't you think I'm aimin' to hobble you. I ain't—not a bit. But I'm tryin' to open yore eyes to somethin' that's real plain. Get yore slicker an' clear out. Me an' th' stableman will peg a few games till this storm lets up."

In a few moments Mesquite rode through the door, and turned to look back. "See you at supper?" he called, and received an affirmative answer.

Facing the driving rain, he leaned against its furious attack as he headed into it.

Hopalong, standing back from the big door, watched his youthful friend until he became a vague blur in the downpour and then was swallowed up.

"Yo're a right good kid," muttered the older man, a frown on his face, "but vested rights are vested rights, whether it's a woman, land, or cows. You ain't got no business cuttin' in a-tall; but you got to learn some things for yoreself, you cub. Tell you *one* thing: if she was *my* woman, you'd learn to keep off th' rustle, an' you'd learn it damned quick!"

There came a furious clatter, turning instantly into a crashing roar as the rain turned to hail, hurtling down in a ghostly white sheet. Above the uproar of the drumming roof the stableman's voice could be heard shouting from the office, where a newly built fire fought

the penetrating chill of the air. Hopalong wheeled at the summons, shook his head savagely, and turned his mind to a pleasanter subject.

"All right, Jerry; I'm comin'."

Mesquite left his horse under the wagon shed belonging to a saloon and dance hall at the end of the street. Entering the latter, he glanced warily around the big main room for a glimpse of the woman whose hopeless expression had challenged his instant attention and set his thoughts working in a line which led past and beyond the range of his experience. The expression which had flashed across her face when she had first seen him was a call for help that he could not deny; apathetic misery had turned swiftly to a pitifully eager hope.

She was not in sight, and he walked over to the bar and asked for a cigar. The man behind the counter eyed him impersonally, put the box back again, and wiped off the bar, his bland countenance masking rioting thoughts, his foxlike cunning prompting him that he could make good use of this fresh, clean, neatly dressed youth. The mental vista opened by the prompting was so full of promise that it offered several leads, each of which was good. It remained only to select the best, and this he would do if his name was Milson; and Milson was his name—Frank Milson, to be exact. He knew what the rest of the townsmen knew about this youth; he knew that the man on the other side of the bar was a gunman without peer in the town, unless it was this gunman's friend, and he would not count.

Youth meant inexperience, and inexperience had pulled chestnuts from the fire for many a man.

"Rotten day," grunted Milson; "but it will clear before night," he qualified, being thoroughly familiar with prairie weather.

"Yeah," growled Mesquite, leaning against the bar so he could keep the rear doors under his eyes. "What's this town goin' to do, now that th' drive trail's peterin' out?"

"It 'll get along all right," answered Milson, taking more interest in his customer than he had on the days before. Then he had regarded him merely as a passing acquaintance, but his interest had grown as his plans developed; and now he took a warm interest in him. It was hard to believe that Deputy Marshal Deakin had fled in a panic from this stripling, whose teeth looked as though they were brushed regularly; and Deakin had been the king of the town's rougher element because he was the toughest man in it. Henceforth it would not be safe to disparage a man's courage and abilities merely because he slicked up like a dude and kept his fingernails clean. But the old frontier standards, nevertheless, were more manly; the times were changing, more the pity.

"When th' fences close the trail, this town 'll just dry up an' blow away," replied Mesquite.

"No, sir! She's here to stay," defended the bartender. "Th' ranges around here are bein' stocked more every month. Trail money was uncertain, an' only came in durin' th' drive season; but range money will come in all th' year round. There's lots worse towns than this un, friend—lots of 'em."

"Mebby," grunted Mesquite. And then he laughed loudly, wondering if the sound would carry past the partition that made the rear of the big front room. "Just th' same, I've rid a long way, an' ain't seen no worse town *yet*."

He swung on his heel and went across the room to study a lurid chromo of "Custer's Last Stand," which portrayed this famous slaughter in frank and gory detail. He wiped some of the grime from the glass and straightened the fly-specked frame; and then moved his eyes without turning his head as a soft, furtive rustling sound caught his ear.

In the back of a narrow hall at the end of the room a woman stood outlined against the light of the open door behind her, and as Mesquite looked toward her she shrank back against the wall, where the faint light from a window revealed her more plainly, and where she could not be seen by any one who might come in through the big main door. The bartender was doing his observing by watching the back of his youthful customer. He was no geometrician, this dispenser of drinks, but he knew how to figure the third angle of one kind of a triangle by observing the other two angles and the included side; and if he worked things as he hoped to, there would be a triangle developed beneath that roof, and a deadly one.

The woman smiled. It was a tentative, frightened, breathless sort of a smile, but it worked a wonder on her pale and hopeless face. It was such a smile as a prisoner might yield from one quick glance at the green fields and the blue sky outside a barred and narrow window. She

smiled, and shrank back along the wall. Into her eyes there had leaped a revealing gladness, almost a prayer; and then, with hand and wrist pressed tightly across her full breasts she turned and hurriedly, noiselessly passed into the imprisoning sanctuary of the kitchen.

Prison it might be, but sanctuary it was, had she but known it. It offered shelter, safety, a position in the world which many women had found to be almost as necessary as the air they breathed. It made a barrier against sneers and acid criticism; yet she hated it, hated it with every atom of her being, hated it with a revulsion which made her clench her fists and writhe.

What is so deadly as a colourless, humdrum existence, each day like the last, and every day spent in the company of a man who carelessly looked past her or through her as if she were a piece of furniture, or had ceased to exist? His occasional caress was so perfunctory and smacked so much of a duty performed that even Frank Milson had noticed and commented upon it. Humdrum and drudgery; the feeling of being a fixture, to be thrown the occasional sop of an endearing term when it suited her lord and master—what crimes may be laid to these!

Mesquite thrilled to the import of that smile, at the sudden faint colour in the pale cheeks, at the gesture of the fluttering hand. He was about to turn and go toward her at the moment when she retreated, and in this moment the bartender's smooth, level voice stated a personal fact impersonally.

"Mebby *you* ain't seen no worse town, friend; but th' *boss* is seein' one right now." The speaker paused

to polish the bar and to let his words sink in, his thoughts racing into a rosy future. "He went down to Julesburg this mornin', an' can't get a train outa th' town till to-morrow mornin'." His smile became sardonic while he waited for the reaction to his valuable and timely information; but he was so surprised by it when it came that he showed it plainly.

Mesquite studied the picture again with engrossing interest, wondering why it was that the information should come so pat, and fit in so well with an impulse which had leaped into his mind out of the unknown void beyond his experiences; and what was there in the bartender's voice that had not been there before?

He eyed the valiant Custer and the heaps of the slain. Something had gone flat; the zest had died out of the game. He was no sneak thief, to steal behind a man's back. There was no lure for him in any game that was dead safe. It smacked too much of solitaire, most stupid of all pastimes, no matter what the prize might be. He swung on his heel, sharply, abruptly, with sudden decision.

"Then you won't never catch *me* in Julesburg," he retorted, holding his hand toward the picture as if to keep it in mind while he disposed of a side lead. "Say," he added, getting back to the main thought, "I'll bet you th' feller that painted this picture worked all his life in a slaughter house. He was shore careful not to leave nothin' out—he was too careful!"

"But that's just th' way they said it was," defended the bartender, who hoped some day to own the picture and the wall it hung on. He wondered if his compan-

ion was stupid or cunning. Sometimes the two come very close together.

In the rear of the building a woman's voice arose in song and was muffled as though by the closing of a door. It was the first time in months that the bartender had heard singing in that part of the house. He waited a moment, then instinctively raised his eyes toward the ceiling, and then looked aross at the youthful art critic, who was more of a critic than either of them realized. "That's just like it was: blood, an' dead men all over."

"Huh!" snorted Mesquite, slowly approaching the bar. "It might 'a' been worse, even; no doubt it was a *lot* worse; but he didn't have to put it all in th' pitcher, did he? It's all right bein' truthful, but if I was paintin' a pitcher of a battle I'd back th' white lies a little more." He flung a coin on the counter. "Gimme some more cigars. I like this un, an'——"

He paused, and the stooping bartender froze as the sounds found him. Overhead sounded muffled footfalls, a slight creaking of the timbers, a solid sound, and then the rhythmic rocking of a chair. Through the open windows facing on the street came a woman's voice, singing, clear and pulsing as the notes of a bird inspired by the ecstasies of spring and freedom.

"Too bad—too bad—too—— —— rotten bad!" growled the bartender, stooping lower and reaching under the counter for a special box or cigars. With an apparent effort he got his mind back on his goods. "Here's some *real* smokes," he said, straightening again. Under his breath he swore helplessly, his thoughts far from cigars.

Mesquite's grave face revealed nothing more than a polite interest, a natural curiosity, and one stimulated by the desire to overlook nothing his companion had said. As a sign that he gave due weight to every word of the man behind the bar, he raised his eyebrows slightly and asked his question as if he were going through a solemn ritual.

"Too bad? An' what's too bad, friend?"

Christian sorrow revealed itself on Milson's face, and, being such a stranger there, it was badly bungled. The sigh accompanying it was too heavy, too lugubrious.

Some men are born with an aptitude for reading human nature, and Mesquite Jenkins had been well endowed with this. The look and the sigh brought instantly to his mind the sound of a coin he had seen rejected by the hotel keeper that very morning.

"Aw, he's breakin' her heart," growled Milson, turning the cigar box around for his customer's inspection. He did not make the mistake of shooting all his arrows into a mark already struck. News, like food, if fed in crumbs, arouses a keener appetite for more; gorging kills it.

Mesquite rapidly ran over in his mind what he had heard in the careless gossip farther down the street. This remark of Milson's gave the fragments a certain cohesion and the weight of truth.

"*Par-ta-gas*," spelled the puncher, bending over the box. "Never heard tell of 'em. Any good?"

"I'm bettin' you never heard of 'em," laughed the bartender, greatly pleased with himself. "They ain't

common out in this part of th' country. An' you can bet that they're good. We wouldn't have 'em, only th' boss writes like a prairie hen crossin' th' mud. He ordered *Parthians*, an' they sent us *Partagas*. One's two for two bits; these are four bits a throw. An' they're *worth* it." He laughed again. "If th' boss could use a pen like he can a rifle, or even a six-gun, it 'd be a hull lot better for his business."

"Four bits is a hull lot to pay for *one* cigar," demurred Mesquite. "But I'm allus willin' to *take a chance;* allus willin' to learn. You can't put on no airs with *me*. What I hanker for I shore take. I want four of these, bein' extravagant by nature an' choice." He shoved his purchase into a vest pocket and paid with a flourish. "So th' boss is real handy with a gun, huh?"

"Best in town," answered the bartender, smiling. "He ain't got no equal nowhere." The speaker glanced at the ceiling, from which sounded the low and timed creaking of a rocking chair. "Man's just got to be, in this town, 'specially when he's got a purty wife." His face clouded, and a show of temper edged his voice. "An' it's damn lucky for him, too, th' way he treats—" He checked himself and changed the subject. "Was you ever in jail, friend?"

Mesquite's eyes narrowed and he peered into those across the counter; but before he could speak the other apologized swiftly, and offered an explanation which took the sting out of the question, but did not explain the thought which had prompted it.

"No offense! That was just th' general idear in my head, but I hadn't oughter put it exactly that way. I

was thinkin' of bein' in prison, an' how eager a prisoner would be to bust out and get away. I wasn't meanin' to ask you if you'd ever been in a real jail; oh, hell—let it go that way before I get myself in trouble with th' boss."

Mesquite chuckled. "Touchy about it, is he?"

"He wouldn't know what you was talkin' about if you said it to him," replied the bartender. "*He* ain't in jail—an' never was, far's *I* know. It shore is too damn bad."

"Betcha he wouldn't think it was too bad," said Mesquite with a laugh. "Bein' nat'rally mournful by nature, I hanker to talk about jails. What jail was you talkin' about?"

Milson glanced significantly about the room, down at the floor and up at the ceiling, where his gaze lingered a moment. Then he looked at his customer, and smiled enigmatically.

"What jail did you think I was talkin' about?" he asked.

The fragment of gossip again stirred in Mesquite's memory, but he lit the cigar with elaborate care, such as a half dollar cigar merits, and flipped the match across the room, watching it until certain that it was out.

"Well, not knowin' just what jail you was in, I couldn't say," he answered, and laughed with boyish gusto.

The bartender joined in the mirth at his own expense and scratched his frowsy head with energy. "Say, friend," he remarked after a moment, "would you know a jail if you saw one, if it didn't have no bars an' locks, and looked like a dance hall?"

Mesquite peered quizzically at him through the beautiful blue smoke of the Partaga.

"Well, you don't have to stay here, do you? Why don't you get up on yore hind laigs, an' bust out?"

"Th' party I'm referrin' to can't bust out," retorted the bartender. "Of course, a *man* can bust out of a place like this, an' go anywhere, plumb easy, but—what you think about that there cigar?"

"I reckon I ain't never tasted no cigar like it," admitted Mesquite. "There's a red head, two-gun Piute playin' crib down at th' stable that ain't never tasted one like it, neither; but he's goin' to, quick as I can take him one." He sauntered toward the door, but stopped and turned at the bartender's protest. "I won't be long; an', anyhow, this place is too lonesome right now. You was right about th' storm; she's done stopped."

"I told th' boss he oughter have some of th' gals come on duty earlier, but he don't figger it that way. It'll be different *some* day."

"Girls?" queried Mesquite. "Who said anythin' about girls? Girls are too damn silly. Take a growed woman now; she usually has a little sense."

"I'll string along with you on that bet," replied the bartender, emphatically, knowing that the girls employed by Corson were long past that stage of their development; and he knew that his customer knew it. "I admire to meet a man that knows his own mind, what he wants, an' where to look for it."

Mesquite's eyes were squarely on those of the speaker, and he thought he caught a pulsing look of avarice and fright. This was inexplicable, and he banished the idea

as being senseless; and while he hung in momentary indecision he heard quick steps across the floor above. Milson heard them, too, and flashed his customer a quick look. His furtive pull on the signal cord had been instantly replied to: the prisoner was coming down.

Milson grinned. "Reckon it won't be so lonesome in a couple of minutes." He nodded to a curtained recess in a far corner of the room, in the rear, and pointed his thumb at it. "Go in, an' be comfortable; there's easy chairs in there."

Mesquite knew whose steps were coming down the stairs, who was to banish his lonesomeness; and he wondered swiftly how it was that the bartender, in the pay and confidence of the proprietor, would so willingly arrange such a meeting. Was it a plot of some of the ex-deputy marshal's friends to get him into a situation where his killing would be accepted as merited? Was the boss really in Julesburg, or waiting somewhere near to shoot from cover, and claim an age old justification?

He squared his shoulders and turned a granite face from the direction of the closed-in recess to confront the man behind the bar. Walking slowly forward, he stopped against the counter, his eyes not for one instant leaving those of Milson, through whose mind flashed many scenes of childhood and folly, long since forgotten. If this were a trap he would help them spring it!

"My friend can wait for his Partagas: I'll try yore easy chairs, bartender, an' talk about jails, with th'

prisoner—or th' jailer—or th' whole damned crowd! Lonesome?" he laughed, whereat a shiver went swiftly up the bartender's clammy spine. "*I'll* make this place lonesome—so damned lonesome it 'll hurt!"

The bartender, motionless as a stone, his gaping mouth revealing its yellow fangs, watched the youth step pantherishly toward the curtain, yank it aside and whirl around again after one quick glance into the little room behind it, his poised hand just above the walnut handle of his gun. Before the rigid and speechless dispenser of drinks could pry loose the words of conjecture stuck crosswise in his constricted throat, the rear door opened, and a pretty woman looked from one to the other in surprise, alarmed by the loud and deadly tones she had heard.

Mesquite's hand dropped down against his leg and he bowed with a readiness which came to him deviously down generations unknown, unguessed.

"How do you do, Mrs. Corson?" he said, smilingly, his hand holding aside the curtain in wordless invitation. "I was just explaining a certain movement for the bartender's benefit!"

"How do you do? And that was?" she asked, not quite reassured, as she slowly passed into the recess.

"We were speaking of jails, an' I was showin' him how to handle th' jailer." For a moment the curtain hung partly suspended, while two cold eyes drove a dare across the room, where its application was misunderstood, but it was recognized for what it was. Frank Milson lost all apparent curiosity by the time the cur-

tain dropped, and as an earnest of this, sang inharmoniously that his ears would not be suspected of listening.

At a nod from his companion Mesquite seated himself, his mind at that instant strangely enough occupied with the bartender, and he wondered at it. With all the interesting possibilities promised by this meeting, face to face with the woman who had intrigued him, he was thinking of the smug-faced Milson, and picturing a baffling look of satisfaction on that person's face. Why was the bartender so pleased about the way things were going? Hopalong had said—but his companion was speaking.

"This is an awful thing for me to do, Mr. Jenkins," she was saying. "I don't know how I ever came to do it."

Mesquite writhed inwardly. Apologizing, either guiltily or coquettishly, for a comparatively harmless move when she contemplated black treachery to her husband, and damnation to herself! He did not like the sound of it—it was inane, asinine, too weak for a stomach such as his. He looked closely at her, realizing that he wanted this woman very much, but for some reason cooling toward her, and cooling rapidly.

"Then why are you doin' it?" he demanded somewhat brusquely, the smile on the bartender's face still before him. If he had walked into a trap they had for some reason neglected to spring it. "Look here: we're puttin' our cards on th' table, face up, you an' me. Might as well start out right. When did you first get th' idea of leavin' town, like you figger to?"

She poured out her story, a story of discontent, fear, hopelessness, desperation; and the bartender's name

occurred many times. Mesquite nodded, helped her on with a word or gesture, and at the close he asked a question.

"How's th' bartender figgerin' so much in all of this?"

She smiled archly. "Jealous already?"

"Mebby; but I want to know where he comes in. Whose idea was this, in th' first place—yore runnin' off an' leavin' Corson holdin' th' sack?"

"Frank Milson's a friend of mine, who sympathizes with me an' has helped me a lot. If it wasn't for Frank I don't know what I'd 'a' done. He told me he'd help me out—an' he has."

"How?"

"Why, don't *you* know?" she whispered affectionately, laying her hand on his gun wrist; whereat he thrilled to danger, tensing himself for anything; but there was no need for alertness.

He nodded. "Yes, I know; he made us acquainted. He's all right, I reckon. We owe him somethin'; but a man's got a right to be jealous of a purty woman like you."

She dimpled, and became serious at once. "Indeed we do owe him something; he's been a good friend of mine—of us both. I never would have had th' courage to take such a step except for him. I hardly would have thought of it even."

"That so? How's that?"

"When I asked him one day what on earth I could do to end this—this unbearable existence, he—he showed me the way, an' said that he'd fix things so I could go in safety."

"Why didn't *he* take you?"

"Somehow I didn't care for him, that way; an', besides, he owns a small interest in th' business here."

"Pardner, huh?"

"In a way, yes; he owns a small interest for money he advanced when things were not goin' well for us." She sighed. "It's all he has in th' world, an' he can't afford to lose it."

"Huh! Reckon we oughta do somethin' for him, if we can."

A look of fright sprang into her eyes, to fade swiftly, and she hesitated. "Yes; what we can." She glanced at the curtain. "Frank's been awful good, an' patient."

Mesquite nodded. "Good an' patient; he shore is a good waiter."

"What you mean?"

"What I said—a patient feller. How'd you come to learn about me? See me?"

"It was th' day after you chased Deakin out of town. Frank saw you comin' toward th' buildin', and he called me. I'd heard about you before. He shore admires you, Mr. Jenkins."

"That's nice of him. What did he say about me?"

"He said you was th' right man, th' man we'd been waitin' for. You are, ain't you?"

"I reckon so. I'm a gunman, a killer. Did he tell you that?"

"Yes; that was why he said you was th' right man; you could protect me. My husband is a gunman, too,

you know." She shivered a little. "He has an awful quick temper. Oh, if you only knew what I've suffered! Th' neglect, th' brutality, th'——"

"Brutality? Corson beat you?"

"No; nothin' as crude as that. If he'd beat me it would be a relief; he'd have to notice me a little if he beat me. I can't stand it any longer!"

"Looks like you won't have to," replied Mesquite. "I'm injectin' myself in this mess, with my eyes plumb open. I'll get you out of it; but I got to figger th' right way. You set tight an' let me make th' plays. We don't want to be seen together, for awhile. I'm goin' outside now, to see if th' way is clear; you stay here till you hear me say: 'Think th' rain is over for good?' Then you rustle out of here, *pronto*, back into th' kitchen. Don't you worry none; just leave it to me. We'll show this town somethin'. Milson can be trusted, I reckon."

"All th' way through," she replied, and felt slighted by the abruptness of her companion's departure. He might have kissed her, might have touched her hand, at least; but she was glad that he was so strange to dealing with women that his embarrassment held him back. She thrilled at the adventures to open before her and was glad that she had taken the first step.

Mesquite walked straight to the bar, then turned carelessly and rested an elbow on it, his glance passing over the deserted room.

"Funny weather," he said. "Think th' rain is over for good?"

"It is for to-day," grunted Milson, a grin on his face,

which widened as skirts swished into the rear hall. "There's a mighty fine woman, friend," he observed.

"There ain't no disputin' that," chuckled Mesquite, very much pleased with himself. He seemed to swell up with conceit and satisfaction, and studiously rearranged his neckerchief. "Gimme one of them Partagas; an' take one yoreself. I'm savin' th' others for my friend. When did you say th' boss is coming back?"

"To-morrow afternoon. You got lots of time."

"How you figger that? We won't have any too much head start—an' I can't leave before dark, anyhow."

"Corson's a bad man to have on th' trail after you," warned the bartender. "Dead shot with th' rifle, mean as hell, an' won't let loose of anythin' he once starts. If I had a gun hand like yourn I'd stay right here in town till I was dead shore he *couldn't* trail me."

"Thought you said he was a good gun man?"

"He's good enough with a six-gun to take big chances; but he can't stack up ag'in' you. With a rifle he's hell on wheels. Better stay in town an' let things take their course."

"I savvy yore drift. Easy man to pick a fight with, ain't he?"

The bartender's eyes glinted and his expression was one of eager hope.

"There ain't none easier, friend; not in this town, anyhow. All you got to do is kick th' bar an' yell for a drink at th' top of yore voice. He'll go up like dry grass with a match to it. Of course, I got to hide my interest. I'm workin' for him, you know, an' got to

stick up for him; but I won't go for a gun till after you face me."

"You don't want to forget no part of that," warned Mesquite. "Just th' same, I hate to shoot a man behind his own bar when he ain't done nothin' to me."

"I know it; but you got to consider her—lessn you back out before things git dangerous."

Mesquite looked at the speaker, and that worthy's knees grew suddenly weak.

"I'm advisin' you to pick yore words damn careful hereafter, Milson—a loose mouth has put better men than you in their graves. I'm in this mess to stay; an' I'll see it through, come hell or high water." Mesquite paused and seemed to be reflecting. "I reckon it's got to be done right here in this room. Why, that shore is th' best way. I won't have to leave town at all. I get th' woman an' th' whole shebang, bar an' all! This shore is my lucky day!"

Milson's face became twisted with several emotions, and into his calculating eyes there leaped a flare of anger; but he controlled himself, and forced a smile.

"Too bad; but that won't do. She'll never stand for that. She wants to get outa town, as fur away as she can get; an' after you make yore play she'll *have* to get out, some place where she ain't knowed. *She's* th' main thing in this game; not me, or you."

Mesquite scratched his head. "Reckon yo're right," he slowly and ruefully admitted. "You allus think of everythin', don't you?" he added enviously. "An' there's somethin' I got to think about: I ain't got no money. I shore can't take her very far without money.

Cuss it, there's *allus* somethin' th' matter with my plans!"

"Don't you worry none about money," soothed the bartender, his eyes gleaming with hope and avarice. He glanced at the safe behind the bar. "When Corson's dead you'll get money enough to take her outa th' country. Five hundred oughta carry you both a long ways."

Mesquite whistled. "Five hundred! I didn't know there was that much money in th' country, in one pile. That part is fixed O. K. I get th' woman, an' five hundred, when Corson's dead; but what are you gettin' out of this? You oughta have somethin' for fixin' things—for gettin' her all prodded up to go with me. I bet it took plenty of persuadin' to get her in that frame of mind. Didn't it, now? Don't be so damn modest, Milson."

The bartender spread his hands over the bar, and grinned self-consciously. "Well," he replied with becoming modesty, "reckon mebby it did take a lot of talk; but talkin' smooth to wimmin allus was my long suit."

"I'm admirin' you more all th' time," said Mesquite, grinning. "I'm cussed if I can talk about anything' but th' weather, an' cows, when I'm with 'em. Reckon it's a sorta gift, huh?"

Milson nodded deprecatingly. "Reckon so; like a lightnin' gun hand: born in a man."

"Well, just th' same, you shore are goin' to get somethin' for what you've done," persisted Mesquite.

"Don't you bother about me; I want to see her

happy, an' I'm figgerin' yore th' man that 'll make her so."

"I figger mebby I am," admitted Mesquite, swelling his chest a little. "I shore aim to try hard, anyhow. What you goin' to do when Corson's gone?"

"This job ain't much; I'm only a hired hand. Of course, I'll have to jump town right smart before folks get to puttin' their heads together; but a bartender can allus get a job as good as this un, anywhere in this part of th' country."

Mesquite chuckled. "Bartenders an' cow-punchers has to ride plumb wide to get away from work, up here." He turned and started for the door. "All right," he called over his shoulder. "Th' fire's burnin', an' th' iron's gettin' hot; everythin's all ready for th' show down. *Adios*."

"*Adios*," replied the bartender, his face wreathed with smiles.

Mesquite rode down the street, caught sight of Hopalong entering the gambling hall, whose faro-dealer would take no chances of crooked dealing while faced by the limping red-head, and the rider dismounted in front of the building. He went in, drifting to a stop at his friend's side, a wicked grin on his face. The faro-dealer had not put in an appearance, and they had their corner of the room to themselves.

"Well, I reckon I got to shoot a skunk," remarked Mesquite cheerfully, in a low voice, "an' save a woman from dyin' in jail. Wimmen shore are peculiar critters."

Hopalong arose, pushed the chair behind him with a savage thrust of a foot, and looked coldly at his protégé.

"Kid, I'm gettin' plumb tired of this damn town. I'm ridin' on, bad arm or no bad arm. I figger on stayin' three days in Butteville, up north on th' trail. Be glad to see you there—if you come alone. So long."

Mesquite smiled at the stiff back moving toward the door and, when his friend and teacher had departed, threw himself into the deserted chair and laughed long and loudly.

CHAPTER XXI

A BUSY MORNING

AFTER the lamps were lighted Corson's was a busy place, and to-night it was crowded, due to certain rumours which had circulated throughout the town. Behind the bar, at the end farthest from the street, was Corson, alert and tense, his gaze hardly leaving the wide, front door. The room was strangely quiet, the low hum of subdued conversation not in keeping with the sounds which usually filled the building. The expressions on the faces of the habitués were eager, strained, anxious, according to the nature of the man.

Mesquite Jenkins slouched through the main entrance, his eyes on the proprietor. He walked directly to the rear end of the long bar and stopped when an arm's length from it. He had put aside the bartender's formula for picking fights, and had his own plans perfected.

"Gimme a cigar," he said in careless tones.

Corson, not taking his eyes from the newcomer, reached behind him with his left hand, groped for and found the box of the desired articles, and pushed it slowly across the counter, in a silence which fairly hurt. Mesquite made his selection by touch, slid a coin on the bar and carefully bit off the end of his purchase. Cor-

son picked up the coin, flung it behind him on the back-bar, his right hand below the counter and out of sight.

"They tell me yo're a gun fighter, Jenkins," he remarked, his words cold, low and clipped, but very distinct.

"They told me th' same thing," replied Mesquite, deadly in his relaxation.

"I'm counted as bein' one, myself," continued Corson in the same even voice. "That makes it sorta even. Looks like it's a question of guts. If you've got any you'll be at th' cross-trails, north of town, at seven o'clock, sharp, to-morrow mornin'. I don't like bar-room fights, in a thing like this. Name yore own weapon, an' bring one friend."

Mesquite hid his surprise, and swiftly rearranged his plan of action to conform with the one which had been forced on him. He nodded gravely.

"Colt suits me," he replied. "My friend's leavin' town, but th' stableman, down near the river, will act for me. Whatever he does will be good enough for me."

"Pete Smith, over in th' corner, will be with me," replied Corson. "If you ain't there by five minutes past th' hour, I'll take my shotgun an' shoot you on sight. This town shore is rough on coyotes."

"If I ain't there by five minutes past th' hour, a shot gun won't do you no good," retorted Mesquite enigmatically.

"Havin' warned you fair and open, I don't give a damn what you do," rejoined Corson, and turning, took a gun from under the back bar, walked slowly through

the door at the end of the room and shut it softly behind him.

Mesquite faced around and glanced over the place, smiling a little as he saw his second and Pete Smith already deep in momentous conference, with the crowd divided between sidling toward them or staying closer to the youthful gun-man. He turned toward the bar again, walking slowly in the direction of the grave but white-faced bartender. Leaning against the counter, Mesquite extended his left hand over it, and the sudden, resounding slap made the crowd jump. Amazed, his cheek flashing crimson over the white imprint of the gun-man's open hand, the bartender froze in rage and indecision.

"I told you you was goin' to get somethin' outa this for yore trouble," said Mesquite calmly. "At six forty-five to-morrow mornin' be down at th' river bank at th' end of this street, with a friend. Bein' th' challenged party you can name yore own weapons. Pick good, because I'm goin' to kill you. If it'll help yore nerve any, you can have one shot first if you pick Colts. Th' stableman'll handle my end of th' arrangements. Don't you keep me waitin', 'cause I got another engagement, with a *man*."

He turned on his heel and walked out, the noise in the room becoming steadily greater with every step he took. When he had become swallowed by the night, bedlam broke loose, and the crowd pressed eagerly around the stableman and Pete Smith.

The bartender stood like a man in a trance; he flushed, gulped, and let his rage loose in a string of epithets.

Fortifying himself with two quick drinks of whisky, he shouted to be heard above the uproar, nominated his second, got hold of himself, and began serving drinks with almost his customary indifference and aplomb. Had the meeting been slated to take place then and there he would have made good use of that promised first shot. Only the morrow would tell what the long hours and the night, and whisky, would do to his courage and nerves.

Dawn found a cloudless sky, and an excited stableman to whom the sleepless hours had dragged through the long night. Bolting a half-cooked breakfast, but nearly awash with strong, black coffee, he hurriedly saddled two horses and then swore again at the lagging clock, suspecting it of treachery. Unable to wait any longer, he vaulted into the saddle and set off toward the hotel, leading the second horse; and as he turned the first corner he sighed with relief at sight of the man who was walking toward him.

The pedestrian grinned.

"Cussed if you don't look like you was goin' to a weddin', instead, mebby, to th' beginning's of a couple of funerals. What's yore hurry?"

"Scared we mebby might be late—an' fifteen minutes ain't none too much to allow for gettin' from th' river to th' cross-trails," answered the stableman. "Suppose he forgits to come, an' makes you late, up north?"

"Then I'll borrow a shot-gun, an' Corson's pleasant idea."

"Milson picked Colts, honin' strong for that first

shot. Are you a plain, damn fool, to give him such an edge! Don't take much of a shot to hit a man when shootin' over th' sights!"

"I know him better'n you know cayuses, which is a-plenty," replied Mesquite. "What's the distance?"

"Twenty-five paces," growled the stableman. "That was th' best I could do. His second is Jim Carey; an' Jim wanted to make it five paces, seein' his man was goin' to have th' first crack. We had to cut to decide it; an' it's damn lucky for you that Jim don't savvy th' pasteboards as good as *I* do. Me an' Jim is goin' to have an argument this afternoon, rough-an'-tumble, with nothin' barred but knives an' guns. He allus *was* a hawg, damn his eyes!"

Mesquite laughed until tears stood in his eyes. Feeling for the saddle, he climbed into it, then reached over and slapped his loyal second on the shoulder.

"I knowed you'd look out for me, Ol' Timer; but you done better'n I figgered on."

"You betcha; an' I sorta had a grudge ag'in Carey, anyhow. Hurry up!"

The Platte scurried writhingly over its shallow bed of sand and pebbles, its face criss-crossed with wrinkling currents, presenting a fierceness that was all bluff, as most men knew. The morning air was cool and crisp, and there was a look of peace on the brown hills across the stream, where the great wide welt of the cattle trail drove straight down the slope to the rippling ford below.

The group on both sides of the dusty road which marked the end of the street, moved back restlessly as

Mesquite and his second dismounted and dropped the reins over the heads of their horses.

The stableman hurried forward to exchange a few words with the man he was going to bite and gouge and kick that afternoon, while Mesquite strode to a plain line scratched in the sandy soil. Twenty-five paces from him, toeing another line, stood Frank Milson, the gun in his hand trembling like an aspen in a mountain breeze. His face was pale and haggard, and his eyes suggested that they had not been closed in sleep. Mesquite smiled coldly at him, and nodded encouragement; whereupon the gun jerked spasmodically and the pale face crimsoned.

The stableman turned his back on his fellow second, meticulously paced the distance between the two lines, and then faced the principals and the eager crowd. He raised his hand, not without a suggestion of importance.

"Tom French is th' referee of this here fight. Git a rustle on you, Tom: we ain't got all day!"

Tom French, having measured the distance when he had first reached the ground, stepped from the crowd.

"Twenty-five paces, gents, as has been measured a *couple* of times. Colts. Milson shoots first at th' count of three. Are you gents all ready?"

Milson gulped and nodded; Mesquite nodded and smiled. The crowd fell back a little, then froze in its tracks. The referee cleared his throat, husky with excitement, and spoke three words rapidly. At the third, Milson's trembling weapon steadied, wavered, steadied again, and roared, the pull of the savagely closing forefinger not improving the aim.

Mesquite, whirled part way around by the shock of the heavy bullet in his right shoulder, caught the slipping gun in his left hand and wreathed it with smoke before his adversary could fire again. Without a second glance at the falling man he wheeled and walked to his horse, stumbling the last few steps, clawed into the saddle and raced northward, his anxious second close behind, and a trailing procession in hot pursuit of them both.

At the cross-trails Corson, pacing to and fro like a nervous cat of the jungle, glanced at his watch again, snapped it shut, and faced his second, the judge, and the eager crowd.

"His five minutes are up, th' damn coward!" he sneered. "Pete, gimme that eight-gauge, an' come on. We got a skunk to shoot, if he ain't left town!"

The hard-riding party strung out according to the merits of the horses, the last man not last because of any desire to breathe the dust of his companions. They raced along the trail and swept into town, the eight-gauge resting across the pommel of the saloon-keeper's saddle. As they swung into the main street all eyes centered on a group in front of Corson's place of business. Three men had risen from something on the ground, and were forcing back the crowd. Through a momentary opening between the moving legs Corson saw that which made him drive the spurs into his horse and raise the eight-gauge. The group scattered before the charge of the maddened animal, and the gun was almost at Corson's shoulder when a man hurled himself forward and wrested the weapon from its owner's hands.

"You damn fool!" yelled the stableman as the heavy charges of buckshot roared over his head, to whistle though the air and fall harmlessly on the plain. "He's fainted from loss of blood, just havin' killed Frank Milson, a job *you* should 'a' done yoreself, *weeks* ago! Here, read this letter an' quit actin' like an idjut!"

Corson took the envelope gingerly, reluctantly, suspiciously, his face expressing bewilderment and a stupid curiosity.

"Jenkins gave it to me this mornin', to hand to you if he couldn't get to th' cross-trails," explained the stableman in a voice the whole town could hear. "*Read* it, you damn fool!"

Corson obeyed, slowly, deliberately, puzzling over the writing, and doubting his own eyes. He read it through again, cleared his throat, and looked down anxiously at the figure in the dust, which stirred slightly and opened its eyes.

"Take him inside, boys!" he ordered brusquely, and turned to a professional man who was packing a small leather satchel. "Will he pull through, doc?" he asked anxiously.

"Pull *through?* Hell, yes; takes more'n a hole like that to kill these youngsters."

Corson sprang toward the wounded man, his arm going under the sagging head, and led the bearers through the wide door of the saloon. Mesquite's eyes opened again and at the question in them, the proprietor nodded emphatically.

"Might 'a' knowed Hopalong Cassidy wouldn't be friends with a skunk," he growled. "I got th' straight

of it, Jenkins; an' this place won't be a jail no longer, not never, *no*how!"

"Only wait three days," muttered Mesquite anxiously, and mumbled something less distinct.

Corson bent his head again and his expression bespoke a sudden understanding.

"*Both* of 'em thoroughbreds!" he muttered, and then spoke clearly. "Butteville? Only three days? Don't you worry, Jenkins—I'm on my way at dawn. He'll wait longer'n three days, or I'll give him th' lickin' of his ornery life." He backed through a door and moved slowly along a bed, gleaming white in the curtained light of the small room. "Here we are, boys; let him down *gentle*—he ain't no damn cow!"

CHAPTER XXII

AN ELASTIC JURISDICTION

AT BUTTEVILLE, on a minor trail leading northward from near the forks of the Platte, Hopalong was spending the third and last day in gloomy self-reproach. He had concerned himself with the morals of his protégé, which ordinarily would have been none of his business; but since the youth was being groomed for entrance into a clannish crowd of old friends, many of whom were married, Hopalong had thought it necessary to know just what kind of a man the youngster would turn out to be.

Mesquite had passed all the tests but one. Physically and mentally he had grown in the estimation of the man whom he had accepted as his teacher; his reflexes were above reproach, his courage of the finest. Just when Hopalong was about to head for the ranch where most of the old crowd were to be found, with Mesquite in tow as an addition to the clan, the youth had shown a sudden and stubborn inclination to run off with a man's wife.

Now the older man was savage in spirit and short in words. Not needing friends in a strange town, nevertheless he was not above making acquaintances; but in this instance he had rebuffed all friendly overtures and sat apart in the miserable shack known as a hotel. The

morning of the third day found him restless, remorseful and of uncertain temper. He was beginning to have strong mental aversions as to the way some of the inoffensive townsmen combed their hair, walked, ate, and talked to one another. Without realizing it he was beginning to carry chips on each shoulder and getting ready to welcome some ill-mannered stare as a preamble to trouble.

Only that morning the hotel-keeper had suggested, with grave deference and sweet restraint, that he would be glad to have Hopalong's room any time its occupant saw fit to surrender it. Whereupon Hopalong paid his bill and told the hotel-keeper where to go. The stableman attached to the hotel took revenge for his displeasure in surreptitiously kicking and otherwise abusing Hopalong's horse, which he was very wise to keep a deep secret.

Hopalong scowled frankly at the loafers draped on dilapidated chairs and whittled soap boxes on the miserable, rickety porch; stalked with heavy tread around the side of the building and transfixed the stableman with an insolent, trouble-hunting glare.

"Saddle my cayuse, an' do it *pronto!*" he growled. The actions of the horse in regard to the hurried ministrations of the stableman, awakened a smoldering suspicion in the mind of its owner. "That animal acts like he was afraid of you. If I thought he had any real reason to be, I'd take you apart an' strew you all over this rotten town."

Finding the stableman without the spirit necessary to make a fight out of it, Hopalong mounted and rode

slowly to the street, where he swung around in the saddle and by one insolent stare, challenged the whole town to start something. Nothing happened, so he turned and rode moodily southward along the trail leading toward the town near the forks of the Platte, his eyes focused on the far horizon where the trail disappeared over a brown, sandy rise.

He had ridden perhaps two hours when a tenuous dust cloud flitted across the washed-out blue of the sky, and he sat bolt upright in the saddle, his mind a tumult of hope. Over the rise an object was pushing up with criminal slowness. A hat, wide of brim and high of crown became visible; but many men wore that kind of a hat. A red shirt inched into sight, the face between it and the hat too vague to be recognized; Mesquite wore a blue shirt.

Well, this stranger might have interesting news, the latest scandal of Ogallala, which without doubt would concern the doings of one Mesquite Jenkins, lately turned ladykiller. The horseman popped over the rise, saw the other rider on the trail, and pushed on rapidly. It was not long before they drew up and stared at each other.

Hopalong's forebodings assumed the form of truth, but as one-time voucher for the actions of Mesquite Jenkins, lately fallen from high estate, he scowled with frank pugnacity. Evidently Mesquite had depended upon strategy rather than on his gun hand, for otherwise this man would not be riding horseback, on earth, anyhow.

"If you got anythin' to say about that cub, you can

save it up an' tell it to him," he growled. "I don't want to listen to you."

Corson, the aggrieved husband of the faithless wife, grinned impudently.

"Yo're a fine damn fool," he retorted, holding the reins shoulder high with both hands as an earnest of good intentions.

Hopalong stiffened, scarcely believing his ears. For the last two days he had looked in vain for a fight, and here, like a gift from the gods, one had met him on the trail. Let bells ring out and joy be unconfined! Before he could figure out a dignified way of starting the trouble, the newcomer continued, his eyes dancing and his homely face wreathed with smiles.

"I'm aimin' to drag you back an' make you apologize to that kid," he said. "He busted up a scheme to turn my wife adrift along th' trails, an' steal my business, not to mention plantin' me in Boot Hill. I allus heard you had brains; but I'm figgerin' that you don't know nothin' a-tall. You ain't got th' head of a tumblebug."

Hopalong instinctively slipped into the slouch that had become a hall-mark of deadliness; yet this man spoke with a calm assurance which bore the imprint of sad truth. He somehow found himself inclined to argue the matter before proceeding to sterner measures; but this strange news about Mesquite came first.

"Meanin'?" he growled, truculently.

Corson laughed outright, and forthwith related briefly and tersely, with unexpurgated vocabulary and plenty of bias, the surprising happenings of the last few hours. While he talked he had turned his horse around

and started back along the trail, the man at his side unconsciously keeping even with him. At the conclusion of the highly interesting recital, Hopalong was two lengths in front and going strong, which made Corson shout, his open mouth providing lodgment to some of the dust of the hard-riding leader. He rubbed gritty teeth with a gritty tongue, spat forcibly and put spurs to his horse.

"Hey!" he shouted as the other's lead became six lengths: "this cayuse of mine ain't had th' rest that yourn has!" he protested, with some indignation.

"You ain't runnin' on no schedule; *I* am!" retorted Hopalong, and took his dust rapidly away.

The evening shadows were timidly investigating the tin cans and other litter of Ogallala's streets when a sweat-covered horse raced through the dust toward a bandaged gentleman who lolled back against the false front of Corson's saloon and dance hall. This gentleman looked morose and glum, but at the sound of the racing hoofs he glanced hopefully up the street, grinned widely, and then masked his pleasure with a scowl.

"Ah, hah!" yelled Hopalong, accusingly, his voice exultant. "So you got it at last, huh!"

Mesquite lazily looked up again, squinting to hide the pleasure and relief in his eyes. "You can go plumb to hell!" he retorted, whereupon his friend and teacher grinned with delight and sprang from the saddle the more closely to admire this hard-faced cub who, of his own accord, had justified every hope of his teacher.

The Platte swirled and eddied, ceaselessly shifting its load of sand from one yellow bar to another, gleam-

ing wide and majestic under the early morning light; but to discriminating eyes it lay exposed for the cheat that it was.

Along a broad, dusty trail that deviously followed its south bank, here running back toward the barren sand hills with their scattered clumps of sage and their prickly pears, and there sidling close to the sometimes verdant banks of the stream, two horsemen rode in the understanding silence of comradeship.

The elder, in his mind's eye, could see caravans of white-tented wagons creaking along behind their weary, drooping ox-teams; lean, hard men in brown homespun rode flankingly before, beside and behind the wagon train, alert for Pawnees, whose great hunting trail they had passed near Grand Island days before. Hunters ranging far and wide for buffalo came and left the train, their percussion rifles resting across the pommels of their saddles; crying children peeked from the wagons, where querulous, scolding women endlessly voiced their discontent, while others bore up silently.

The Pawnee range had been left behind, but as yet these alert riflemen did not know it; and if they had, they would have found no peace of mind in the knowledge, or relaxed their vigilance: the country of the Sioux lay around them, with that of the Crows and the Blackfeet drawing steadily nearer. Hopalong's mental picture changed, and instead of the white-topped wagons he could see a vast, spread-out herd of long-horned cattle endlessly plodding, endlessly complaining, endlessly searching for the scattered grass.

He smiled sadly at the retrospect. The Sioux had

been taught their lesson and no longer counted; the Pawnees, likewise profiting by severe chastisement, and changing with their environment, now made excellent herders, and cheap ones; their raids had dwindled in scope and dignity from the far-flung prairie coursing of their war parties to the petty sneak thievery of individuals, chary of letting blood. The Crows and the Blackfeet, or what was left of them, had long since learned that reservation life meant a longer life, with a natural death, even though brought close enough by confinement, as its dubious reward. No more did men whisper around their camp fires about the war parties of the "Burnt Thighs," the "Scarred-Arms," the *Corbeaus* or the *Pieds Noir;* they no longer spoke of beaver valleys, the price of furs and the gossip of the trading posts; no more were heard discussions about the relative merits of Oregon or California, of the fear that winter should catch them this side of the Blue Mountains; they now talked of bunch grass, winter feeding, cattle prices, drives, and the cook's cooking.

Gone were the earlier ages, and their successor was fading, throttled by great stretches of fencing, anemic because of the extending railroads, spotted with the fever blotches of sowed ground and sprawling hamlets. His age was passing with his days, and he was content to go out with it.

The younger rider saw only the present, the wide, shallow trail ceaselessly winding and dipping; the barren hills on both sides of him, between which meandered the North Platte; the marvels of erosion beginning to show in cliff and butte. Far ahead on the horizon

reared what was left of the famous Chimney Rock, a "huge haystack with a great pole running up from it," an immense "inverted funnel." Courthouse Rock, that wonder of Nature's sculpturing, lifted its ramparts, its domes and regular roof-line against the faded blue of the sky.

To him all was new, appealing only to the eye; but to his companion it unfolded tale after tale, the wonder of man's stubborn triumphing over obstacles; of tears, privations, suffering and death. Scott's Bluffs mutely told the elder the tragedy of their naming; every mile spoke with silent tongue and brought a look of reverence into the weather-beaten face under that broad hat brim.

"Wonder how far Red's ahead of us?" asked Mesquite, squinting an appraisal of the miles between him and the high horizon.

"You won't see him till you get to th' ranch," answered his companion. "He'll be headin' down Powder River by now, makin' short drives for th' cattle to pick up weight. I'll be kinda glad to get back ag'in, an' see Buck, an' th' rest." He pushed his hat back abruptly. "Mind you keep yore eyes skinned in Laramie, Kid."

Mesquite grinned, but he did not reply. Keep his eyes skinned! What need for that when they two rode side by side? What was Laramie but a collection of buildings, a human ant-hill? And what human dared to threaten when Hopalong Cassidy and Mesquite Jenkins rode through town with knee touching knee?

This master gunman at his side always warned him

to be cautious, a prescription that the doctor, himself, was not so fond of. The soft sound of gauntleted gloves gently rubbing, the open sheaths, the rising and falling walnut handles of the scratched and dented Colts—they brought a smile to the young man's face, a smile of assurance.

Twenty-five miles a day they had loafed along, which kept their horses in good condition; at times this distance had lengthened; at others, shortened, according to the suitability of camp spots. Day after day they had pushed on, content with each other's company, asking nothing more than what they had, occasionally flinging a glance at their lone pack animal, their only bane.

Then came the afternoon when Laramie sprawled before them and they gladly rode along its dusty streets, put up their horses and went off to see the sights, still feeling the motions of their saddles. Strangers to Mesquite nodded gravely to his companion, but they seemed to be reserved about something. On Hopalong's face slowly grew a restrained curiosity, tinged with suspicion. They turned a corner and bumped into a man who had bolted from a building. The stranger swore at the impact, glared at the two, and then shoved out his hand and grabbed Hopalong's.

"Hello, you pirate!" he shouted, his face wreathed with a happy grin.

"Hello, Ben, you old sage-hen!" replied Hopalong, pumping the hand. "Meet Mesquite Jenkins, a friend of mine. Mesquite, this here's Ben Thompkins, from up our way. How's everybody, Ben?"

"Everybody up th' trail is all right," answered Ben, and hesitated.

"That's good," replied Hopalong. "Ain't seen Red, have you? He might 'a' quit his job an' come to town for a whirl. He allus did like this town."

The other nodded casually. "Yeah, I saw him," came the slow reply. "More'n that, Hoppy; I helped get him to th' hotel. He's down at th' hotel now, in bed. Outa danger now, though."

Instinctively Mesquite glanced at his friend's face. He saw the calm disturbed by undercurrents; the jaw set; the narrowed lids, narrowed from habit and the years of facing a strong sun and a shining plain, become more so, and from something more than habit; into the grave eyes a flame flicked and died down.

"Red took sick?" calmly asked the best friend that Red Connors ever had, patiently leading the other to details.

"Might call it that; a doctor's been tinkerin' with him," answered Ben Thompkins. "Used a probe, th' doc did."

"Get what he was after?"

"Shore; doc allus does. Had a heap of practice, he has. He allus reminds me of a badger diggin' out a ground squirrel. More'n one feller has threatened to lick th' doc when he got well."

Hopalong chewed reflectively on this cud of information for a moment, and then carelessly asked another question.

"Even break?"

"Can't hardly say; didn't see it. I come acrost Red

stumblin' along th' street, not knowin' where he was goin', but stubborn as hell. I heard it was down in One-Eye Johnson's. He's got a dive on th' outskirts of town som'ers."

"Who did see it?"

"Now if it was anybody but you," went on Mr. Thompkins, ignoring the question, "I wouldn't make no suggestions a-tall; but yo're like greased lightnin' with a gun, an' mebby it's all right to talk. Seein' that's so, I figger th' best way for to get th' hang of th' hull thing is for you to wander into One Eye's saloon, an' set in a game of draw with a feller called Cheyenne Walters. I heard tell Red was playin' with him when the accident happened. You better take yo're friend here, for I reckon mebby it's a cold deck."

"There's a lot of folks faster'n Red with a gun," soliloquized Hopalong, "so I don't know just how to figger it. Where is this place, an' how do I get there?"

The terse directions found Mesquite as eager a listener as his friend, and after a few more words on casual subjects the three separated. Ben Thompkins, grave and thoughtful; the others, thoughtful and grave.

The clerk of the hotel was glad to see Hopalong, the impetus of his pleasure carrying with it a warm welcome for Hopalong's quiet companion. He whirled the register around, took the pen from Hopalong, and started to put down a number after the names; but checked his hand, read the words again, and looked up. He was an old hand and very sophisticated, as all hotel clerks should be.

"I'm givin' you Number Twenty-Two, Mr. Boone,"

he remarked. "No relation of th' famous Daniel, I reckon?"

Hopalong smiled. "I ain't never run th' brand back far enough; an' I reckon mebby th' brand-book was lost off th' ark, anyhow."

The clerk permitted himself to smile. "Reason I asked was because three grandsons of Daniel Boone went out to Oregon along th' old trail. Thought mebby you was one of 'em; but that'd make you too old. I'd like to give you a better room, Mr. Boone, the one next to yourn on th' right has got one more window in it, but there's a wounded man, from up Twin River way, there now. There's a door between, but I don't reckon Mr. Connors 'll disturb you none, seein' as he's comin' along right fast."

"My snores'll drowned any noise he can make," responded Hopalong, half turning away. "Supper at six, same as usual?"

"Doors open at six; yes, sir. There's water an' towels in yore room."

Hopalong took the key, nodded, and turned away. "Come on, Kid; we'll go up an' wash off a couple of layers." He slowly mounted the stairs, leading the way.

In the dim light of the upstairs hall they made out the number twenty-two and, opening the door, stepped quickly aside and unceremoniously entered the room at the right. A brown-faced man resting easily on a pile of pillows was frowning in their direction, but as he recognized his visitors a cheerful expression came to his face.

"How'd you coyotes get here so quick?" asked Red Connors. He shifted slightly and grinned to hide a twinge of pain.

"Oh, got tired of ramblin' 'round, an' headed for home," answered Hopalong. "Not havin' no herd to hold us back, we come right along. Where'd you get th' cucumbers?"

"What you mean, cucumbers?" asked Red, with spirit.

"Them what you ate. They *allus* make you sick; you oughta have better sense than tackle 'em," accused Hopalong, and tried again, his glance passing over the washstand where it did not linger even for a moment on a dark, cylindrical object standing beside the basin. He guessed it was a .41, which suggested a derringer. "Then what made you sick?" he asked.

"Th' doc figgered it was nerves," said the injured man with great gravity, and looked properly indignant in anticipation of a skeptical rejoinder.

"That so?" marveled Hopalong. One could see that he was deeply shocked, so shocked that he made strange noises down in his throat, which seemed to be troubling him. He cleared it gently and the look of distress passed from his innocent countenance. "Well, I'll be teetotally damned," he said, still marveling. "This is th' first time I ever saw a cow-puncher sick abed from nerves. Now, if he'd said gall, I could understand it. Shore he didn't?"

Red showed his profound contempt by ignoring the speaker, but he squirmed a little, and looked appealingly at Mesquite, his restless glance playing from that

youthful face to the door and back again like a single hose trying to put out three fires at once. Mesquite's expression was so dumb that it strained his face, and he showed no sign of understanding the appeal. Red sighed and became fretful.

"How's this moss-head been behavin' hisself, Kid? An' what happened back in Ogallaler after you left me?"

"Th' deppity marshal had yore disease: nerves," replied the youth, trying to look as intelligent as a cow in the face of Red's grimaces toward the door. "They stampeded him, an' he didn't come back no more."

Red found that he had too many covers over him, for the room suddenly had become hot and close, and he wished he could stop sweating; but if he threw off the sheet his friends would see the bandage. His temper was beginning to show the influence of the rising temperature under the covers, and he wondered how any man as dumb as Mesquite had ever reached even that person's tender age.

"We ain't excitin' yore nerves, are we, Red?" anxiously asked Hopalong, with heavy solicitude, whereupon the flush on the sick man's face stood out a little more vividly against the white of his pillow. From the blank expression on Mesquite's countenance Red could see that the youth was greatly puzzled by the invalid's facial contortions and his meaning glances at the door.

"No!" barked Red, out of the corner of his eye keeping close watch on his visitors, and worrying lest Hopalong should see the bullet which the doctor had dug for with such stern vim and vigor.

He let his hand drop over the side of the bed and

swing gently to and fro until it touched and rested on a boot. At that moment a horse fly buzzed over the washbowl, and, with a muttered curse on his lips, Red raised the boot and let it go. For a sick man, suffering from too many, or too few, nerves, his aim was a miracle. The fly zoomed against the ceiling, where it made three times the noise; but a .41 caliber slug carromed against the wall and dropped behind the washstand. Red grinned at his good aim and at the success of his stratagem, and found keen pleasure in the surprised starts of his companions.

"That fly has near drove me loco," he explained, and then smothered a curse. The .41, still preserving its unstable, cylindrical form despite what it had recently passed through, was rolling from under the stand on a wide and graceful curve which should bring it against Hopalong's boot. As Red squirmed with rage, Mesquite raised a hand and pointed to where the fly was bouncing across the ceiling, and quickly put his foot on the tell-tale bullet. Red flashed him a look of admiration and gratitude, and entertained the hope that the youth would eventually become intelligent. Hopalong, hat in hand, had risen to go after the fly, but Red checked him.

"Let it alone, Hoppy; I'll get it, next time. I *allus* pay my own scores," and the look he flashed Mesquite was so loaded with meaning that it would have made an impression on a cast iron deer ornamenting some over-ornamented front lawn.

Hopalong reluctantly dropped the hat, sighed regretfully, and sat down.

"When are these here nerves of yourn goin' to get so you can travel?" he asked, reaching out and idly fingering the holster hanging at the head of the bed. "We're honin' to get back to th' ranch, an' Buck; an' we all three oughta go together."

"Doc ain't said; an' *will* you quit *pawin'* things?" blazed Red, his face the colour of his hair. He spoke too late, for Hopalong had the Colt in his hand and was carelessly fooling with it in the senseless preoccupation of a man who idly pulls grass while he talks. "First thing you know you'll shoot yoreself!"

"Is it loaded?" asked Hopalong in alarm, peering curiously into the end of the barrel and into each chamber. He had only handled loaded guns for something over thirty years, without an accident; but anyone could easily see that he was a little frightened.

"Course it's loaded, you fool!" snapped Red, with his well-known tolerance for his friend's petty weaknesses. "Quit *fumblin'* with it, *will you!*"

Hopalong jumped slightly, hastily replaced the weapon, and then shook his head sadly. "Th' doc's shore right; yore nerves is plumb gone to hell. It's an awful thing; but, just th' same, you needn't act like a mad wolf! Fine way you welcome yore friends!"

"What you expect!" snapped Red. "Band of music, an' fireworks, an' everythin'? You get outa here, an' don't you come back till you can mind yore own damn business!"

Hopalong sighed, glanced from the swaying holster to the innocent washstand and then down at Mesquite's unnaturally extended right foot.

"All right. Go ahead, Kid; I'll foller you."

"Stay where you are, Kid!" blazed Red with unnecessary emphasis, finding the sheet very warm again. He glared at Hopalong. "Ain't you man enough to take th' lead? There ain't nobody layin' for you out in th' hall!"

"Yo're a damn sick man, Red," commiserated Hopalong, slowly rising and going toward the door. He awkwardly bumped into Mesquite, who lost his balance and struggled hard to regain it without shifting the extended foot, a feat that kept Red's heart in his throat. Hopalong slouched through the doorway and they heard him moving clumsily about in the next room.

"Of all th' clumsy —— —— cows!" blazed Red, billowing the sheet with energetic knee. He swiftly extended his hand. "Here, Kid; gimme that slug, quick! An' keep quiet about it: savvy?"

Mesquite hurriedly picked up the slug, dropped it, grabbed it again and furtively gave it to the man in the bed.

"What's it all about, Red?" he asked in a whisper that could be heard in the street.

"Shut up!" growled Red fiercely. "I shot m'self cleanin' that gun. If Hoppy ever heard about it he'd tell it to th' rest of th' crowd, an' I'd never hear th' end of it. Close th' door behind you when you go out."

"Hard luck," said Mesquite with deep sympathy. "Powder burn you bad? Most generally does when it's so close. Got to look out for blood-poisonin', if it did. Lemme look an' see."

"I'm payin' a doc to look, you jackass!" retorted Red, uncomfortably hot again.

"Get outa here, an' take that limpin' Siwash back to th' ranch as fast as you can get him there. He's allus pokin' his nose in business that don't concern him." Red looked with such disconcerting directness at his companion that a doubt arose in Mesquite's mind.

Mesquite removed his hat and fumbled at it.

"Sorry yo're so sick, Red," he said. "Shouldn't we oughta stick around till you get well? They'll probably treat you better if we do. We can take turns sittin' up nights with you."

Red's reply is unprintable, in its entirety; but the latter part of it will pass the censor.

"They're treatin' me all right!" he snapped, his face flaming again. "I don't want no tumble-bugs keepin' me awake nights; an', besides, I got th' best nurse that ever tossed a flapjack. She's O. K."

Mesquite grinned. "Oh!" he said. "*Oh!*" he repeated, and lost the grin as the other boot crashed against the wall above his head.

He ducked, turned and slammed the door behind him in almost one movement, and wandered into the next room, one hand over his mouth and the other pressed tightly against his ribs. Dropping on a chair he smothered his laughter against a sleeve, then looked with watery eyes at his grinning friend.

".41 wasn't it?" whispered Hopalong.

Mesquite nodded and got control of himself. "Said he shot hisself, cleanin' his gun—which is a .45," he remarked, his grin threatening to split his face. "Wouldn't let me look for no powder burns."

Hopalong nodded, drew his left-hand gun, and

started to clean it with a red bandanna, an operation which Mesquite immediately began to duplicate.

"Derringer, I reckon," commented Hopalong, reloading the weapon. "Lots of tin-horns carry 'em."

"Why don't you let him have his own way about it?" inquired Mesquite, industriously cleaning.

"He's too trustin'," answered Hopalong. "His gun hadn't been shot, an' it hadn't been cleaned since he left th' dusty trail. If it was an even break he'd 'a' told us all about it, knowin' we wouldn't cut in on no play like that. Looks to me like a try at murder; an' edgin' into them kind of gunplays is my business. Up our way, Kid, I'm a deppity sheriff under Buck."

"Yo're a cussed long way from yore jurisdiction," suggested Mesquite, still cleaning. He was not surprised by the information, for he had noticed his friend's concealed badge several times during the last few months.

"My jurisdiction runs with my friends, an' I never turn no job like that over to nobody else. What you reckon yo're gettin' all ready for?"

"I dunno; nothin' special, I reckon," answered the youth, grinning impudently.

"This here's goin' to be a one-man job, Kid. Reckon you better stick around th' hotel this evenin' an' hand him a glass of water when his nerves get to stampedin'." Something became wrong with his eyes, and he blotted them. "My Gawd!" he gasped. "Red Connors sick with *nerves!*"

Mesquite sighed and glanced out at the sun. "Near six," he said. "Let's wash up, an' go eat. I'm hungry."

"You ain't never anythin' else," commented Hopalong, finishing with the other gun. He considered it a moment, then tossed it, belt and all, on the bed. "Come on, then." On the way he stopped at Red's door, whereat snores sounded abruptly and loudly on the other side. Hopalong grinned and led the way toward the stairs, his grinning friend close at his heels.

CHAPTER XXIII

THREE KINDS OF DRAW

WHEREVER he was known by sight or reputation Hopalong Cassidy was known as a two-gun man, as a red-haired, two-gun man who limped slightly. The three facts might lead to recognition in the saloon and gambling dive of One-Eye Johnson, and this was to be avoided if possible; for if Cheyenne Walters learned the identity of the man he played with, Cheyenne might not care to take chances. Since Hopalong could not change the color of his hair, although Mesquite had offered to experiment to that end with the hotel ink; and since the limp was a permanent affair, all he could do was to discard one gun. This, in itself, rendered him inconspicuous by making him one of many.

In this year of its existence Laramie was larger than most of the frontier towns, and the first flush of its hectic life had passed, like the passing of mumps, the measles and scarlet fever of childhood days; but, even so, it was far from being the sedate Western city that it now is. Law and order had come to it after a fashion with spells of civic righteousness, at times interrupted by painful lapses.

One-Eye Johnson, as sensitive to all vigilante movements as a hound is to a hot game-scent, had timed his

arrival with canny instinct. The last throe of law and order was stilled and the pendulum was swinging higher and higher toward the other extreme. Locating on the outskirts of the town in a board shack, he was reaping swiftly while the opportunity lasted, his resources converted into ready cash, and easily transportable at short notice.

He had come into the country before the first gold rush to the Black Hills, and had cherished the thought that he was a miner; but after year had followed year and found him no richer, he made the acquaintance of Cheyenne Walters, and started in business in Deadwood, where they both had made the mistake of being on the same side of the political fence. When their gang had been swept from power they soon found that Deadwood was no place for two hardworking individuals of their trade, and they left it, to leave in turn some half dozen other towns before they landed in Laramie. With him in all his migrations had gone Cheyenne Walters, professional gambler, who depended more on digital dexterity than on the laws of chance. One painful episode had taught the gambler that he was too slow with weapons to depend on a thigh or shoulder holster, and he had perfected a gun-play of his own which had served him well.

Together the partners made a fair working combination and they had lived well. Selling liquor to the Indians was a lucrative, if risky, business; and no Indian need fear being refused a drink if he could pay for it. This somewhat accounted for the shiftless, picturesque crowd that gravitated to One-Eye's place, among whom

were full-bloods, half-breeds, fugitive Mexicans forced far north, and the flotsam of the fairer-skinned races.

Down the street toward the shack of One-Eye meandered a typical cow-puncher, talking to himself as he circled wide around the piles of tin cans and other litter. He limped slightly, was red-haired, and wore one gun, and he seemed to be very tired. He blundered past the open door and stopped, seeing no more shacks on the street. He had reached the last building. This seemed to bother him and he swung ponderously around to stare curiously at the noisy saloon.

One-Eye never passed up a customer, and as the puncher hesitated in the faint glow of the lamplight from the open door, the proprietor gestured significantly, whereupon Cheyenne Walters, lazily arising from his tilted chair, sauntered to the door and leaned against the casing, studying the star-riddled sky with appraising eyes, seeking some sign of the morrow's weather. He became aware of the wavering figure in the street, peered closely at it, and chuckled in great good nature.

"Hi, stranger!" he boomed. "Ain't thirsty or lost, are you?"

The limping stranger shoved his big hat back on his head, laboriously focused on the genial man in the doorway, and waved an arm in a generous gesture which seemed to include everything within miles.

"No, sir; I ain't lost. I ain't thirsty; but I shore am awful tired. An' lonesome. Tired an' lonesome. Terrible things, them are. Wouldn't reckon a man

would be tired and lonesome in a big town like this, with four months' pay in his pocket, would you?"

"Pay or no pay, there ain't no sense of bein' either," replied Cheyenne Walters, chuckling sympathetically. This man in the street was not as drunk as he might be, but he was far from being sober. For some reason this seemed to please Cheyenne. "Come in, an' rest awhile," he invited.

The man in the street pondered deeply over this suggestion, swaying gently from side to side. "Funny thing," he mumbled, determined not to be side-tracked from the main line of his thought. "Bigger th' town th' more lonesomer I get. All th' way up with th' herd I wasn't lonesome a-tall. All th' way from th' Concho, that was. Soon's th' outfit busted up, after deliverin' th' cattle, I heads for this here town; an' I've been lonesome ever since. It shore is a hell of a world, stranger." He weaved slowly toward the door, and lowered his voice. "Tell you th' truth, stranger, I been lookin' for a little game of draw, but I'm on a strange range, an' ridin' careful."

Cheyenne threw back his head and laughed. "Loose in Laramie, an' *lookin'* for a game! Why friend, they was all around you, everywhere. We got one right in here."

"Looks good," muttered the stranger, peering into the room, and wrapping Cheyenne in a whisky aroma, toned with the odor of stale tobacco. "Most of them places up in th' town are too highfalutin'. Don't like lookin' glasses on th' walls when I'm playin' draw. Bad luck, they are." He grinned, and pawed Cheyenne's

arm. "I'm the best draw expert ever come up th' long trail," he confided; "but I don't like lookin' glasses."

Cheyenne snorted indignantly. "Are you? I'm purty good myself, an' we got a couple of boys that reckon they're th' best poker players in th' country. Who told you that you was a good player?"

The stranger rocked back on his heels and regarded Cheyenne with a disdainful stare. "Everybody down our way says so; an' I admits it. You reckon you can play?"

"I never come up no cattle trail, but I can beat any man that has," said Cheyenne with spirit.

The stranger pushed past him and blinked in the lights of the room. "That so? That so? Huh! My pap cut my teeth on a poker deck. I'm a draw expert. Where's them fellers you was talkin' about? Hey?"

Cheyenne pointed at a table where two disreputable persons idled over half-filled glasses. "Right there, stranger. Hank Boggs, an' Tom Blodgett. My name's Cheyenne Walters."

"Pleased to meetcha," mumbled the stranger, weaving toward the table. "Name's Lucas; Bill Lucas. Get th' cards, an' th' beans, an' le's play." As he advanced he scrutinized the walls, saw no looking glasses, and sighed with content. Dropping to a chair at the table and facing the bar, he threw his arms across the table top and pillowed his head on them. A graduated pupil of Tex Ewalt, master poker-player, was waiting to be led to the slaughter.

Cheyenne and his friends exchanged cheerful looks,

and glanced toward the bar, from behind which a half-breed was coming with a box in his hand. Placing this on the table, he counted out stacks of chips, took twenty-five dollars from each of the three and then glared at the reclining stranger.

"Twenty-five dollars, boss," he said impatiently.

Cheyenne reached over and shook the stranger's shoulder.

"Twenty-five dollars for th' chips, Mr. Lucas," he said.

Mr. Lucas roused himself, pushed the hand from his shoulder and blinked at the outstretched hand of the breed.

"Wha' say?" he demanded, and after the matter had been made painfully clear, he grudgingly dug down into a pocket, produced a thick roll of bills, and clumsily thumbed off the required amount. "Take it, an' get out." He regarded the chips with a little surprise, but his face cleared with understanding. "Down our way we use beans; red an' white beans. These here flapdoodles are just as good, though. Low deals?"

Cheyenne nodded. "We mostly cut high for deal, but one's as fair as th' other." He broke the seal, tossed the pack on the table and, after the cuts had been made and the cards faced, he picked up the deck and shuffled swiftly, smoothly and with graceful dexterity. Ruffling a corner of the pack he offered it for the cut, ignoring the look of rapt admiration on the stranger's face. The cards fell swiftly, precisely, with a whirling motion as they sailed through the air, and the

rest of the deck was deposited with a flourish near the dealer's hand.

Mr. Lucas was the last to discard, handicapped by the time he had lost in his admiration of the deft dealing. Suddenly becoming aware that he was delaying the game, he muttered apologetically and tossed two cards into the discard; and when the hands had been filled he gravely drew a cartridge from a loop of his belt and placed it beside his chips.

His companions looked at him curiously, and Cheyenne voiced their collective wonderment.

"What's that for?" asked the gambler, suspiciously.

"Wha's what for?" asked Mr. Lucas.

"That there cat'ridge."

"That's a tally; tha's all."

"Tally of what?"

"'S part of m'system," explained the stranger, grinning affably.

"What system?" demanded Cheyenne.

"Little system of m'own. Go ahead; le's play!"

The hand was played without much action. Mr. Lucas winning a few chips. He was a little elated, and seemed to be growing eager and impatient. Two more hands and his consistent winning puffed him up and made him boastful. On Boggs' deal he won again, and while Cheyenne shuffled and dealt Mr. Lucas told tales of great poker games in which he had played a most heroic part. As Cheyenne finished dealing Mr. Lucas, still babbling, placed another cartridge near his chips. As his discard joined the others he half turned his head, listening to an inharmonious voice singing in the

street. It grew steadily louder and more inharmonious.

"*—an' bedded down th' cattle on th' hill clost by.*"

Mr. Lucas grinned fatuously. "Betcha that *hombre* never saw Caldwell, let alone beddin' down no cattle on th' hill clost by. Got a voice like a file. *Oh;* all right—gimme three." He picked up the cards one by one, regarded them with a stony face and tucked them into his hand. "I'll ride with you, friend, an' make it cost Mr. Boggs jest twice as much. Damn that singin'!"

The play went swiftly and Mr. Lucas won again, a few chips. While Mr. Blodgett collected the cards for the next deal, the stranger turned in his chair and watched the door for the entrance of the screechy vocalizer, who had the courtesy to lower his voice as he entered.

"Huh!" growled Mr. Lucas, belligerently, as he turned back to the table. "Damn screech owl. I won't have no luck, now."

The screech owl was a beardless youth, light-hearted, debonair, neatly dressed. He was lithe of body but deceptively solid across chest and shoulders, and he had the grace of a cat. His cold, level gaze passed over the room, lingered for a moment on the poker players, and settled on a Mexican in a corner, who was lightly strumming the strings of a guitar. Wandering over toward the strummer, the newcomer hummed softly, exchanged white-toothed grins with the owner of the guitar, and forthwith lost himself in soft harmony.

Cheyenne was dealing again, and when he had dealt the fillers and put the deck down, Mr. Lucas had added

another cartridge to his tally. This quiet movement seemed to be disturbing to Cheyenne, whose frown was now frank and heavy. The tally grew as round followed round, and Cheyenne, tense with suspicion, was keenly studying the cheerful stranger.

"Seems to me yo're winnin' purty steady, Mr. Lucas," observed the gambler, alert and ready for any play. His eyes flickered to the tally and back to the stranger's face. "You got lots of luck—or mebby too much system."

Mr. Lucas looked at him calmly, careless of any hidden meaning in the words, because he shrewdly believed them to be a blind, a false trail.

"You'll mebby notice that my winnin's has all been little pots, an' that I've lost some real big uns. I ain't won a big pile to-night. I'm gettin' a mite restless; feel like takin' off th' limit an' playin' a real game?"

Cheyenne tried not to appear too eager.

"Not while yo're keepin' that tally," he demurred.

Mr. Lucas moved the cartridges with a huge forefinger, counting them with silent but moving lips. "Five," he muttered, and then grinned at the suspicious gambler, who was not as worried as he pretended to be. "Only need one more, an' th' tally's done finished. I'm a little mite superstitious," be confessed, with a trace of embarrassment. "Th' seventh deal is where I plunge. You've mebby noticed that I shoved out a tally every time you dealt, seein' you was th' first dealer? Two more rounds an' I turn her loose, an' show you-all somethin' about draw that you ain't never seen before. Gimme two cards."

The cheerful youth humming to the strumming of the guitar closed his eyes in the ecstasy of his harmonizing, but they opened from time to time and idly took in the poker players. He paid no attention to the slight frown on Mr. Lucas's face. When Cheyenne Walters picked up the deck for his sixth deal, the humming grew softer and the eyes remained open. The music-lover was present against orders to the contrary, but that did not prevent him from using his wits and anticipating events he knew were slated to take place.

Mr. Lucas, ramblingly verbose while the cards were being shuffled, placed another cartridge on the table, and pushed back gently, moving on his chair as if to find a more comfortable position. He grinned in the faces of his opponents and swaggered a little.

"Goin' to show you-all some action right soon," he boasted, and glanced swiftly around the room.

Cheyenne, picking up the pack after the cut, began dropping the cards deftly in front of the players. He was about to pick up his own hand when the cold voice of Mr. Lucas stopped him.

"Cheyenne," said the stranger, "I done got an even half dozen markers here. I never tally more'n that many. Th' seventh allus comes outa my gun. Any man should oughter be satisfied with cheatin' six times hand-runnin'. You try it once more an' me an' you'll mix, sudden an' hard."

Two chairs went over backward, their occupants showing remarkable agility and a praiseworthy desire to get away from the table. The humming and the strumming had ceased, the strummer wide eyed and

his fingers seemingly frozen to the strings; the hummer balanced on the balls of his feet, his right hand poised above the walnut grips of his gun. Cheyenne half arose, staring at the ominous and coldly sober Mr. Lucas, whose right hand toyed idly with the accusing markers.

"What th' hell you mean?" blazed Cheyenne, his own right hand going out over the table, in plain sight, and far away from any holster. His left still held his cards. Apparently he was defenseless; but swift and furtive creakings told of a scurrying audience, eager to get out of a threatened line of fire.

Cheyenne was not so thin skinned that he strongly resented being called a card cheat, from any matter of pride; but it was bad for his business to allow such a reputation to attach itself to him. This was the second stranger within a week who had tried to put that brand on him. "You can eat that remark, damn quick!" he growled.

"I ain't eatin' nothin' hereabouts," replied Mr. Lucas, quietly. "A few days ago a friend of mine played cards with you, an' got shot. I'm callin' you a cheat, an' waitin' for yore play. You got three jacks and a pair of aces in yore hand; I saw you markin' th' cards, an' I saw you deal 'em to yoreself, you carrion-eatin buzzard!"

At the sudden jerk of Cheyenne's extended arm Mr. Lucas writhed sidewise off the chair, his own right hand flashing to the moving wrist, his fingers gripping it as in a vise. He jerked his shoulder and the gambler's arm twisted and straightened, where another pound of energy would either dislocate or break it. There was a

sudden, concerted movement in the crowd, but the harmony-loving youth barked a terse and vibrant command, backing it with the cold muzzle of his gun.

"Stick 'em up!" he snapped, and his words and the sound of his voice were thoroughly convincing. Hands went up toward the ceiling, and the one-eyed proprietor lost all interest in anything under the bar, taking great pains to rest both hands and forearms in plain sight on the counter.

"Trimmin' strangers is mebby good business, sometimes," said Mr. Lucas in cold contempt; "but I told you I was th' best draw expert that ever come up th' Western trail. I meant that, *both* ways, an' I've showed you that I am in *one* way, by namin' yore cards." He loosened his grip on the extended arm and flung it sidewise. "Go for yore gun an' I'll prove it th' second way, you white-livered coyote!"

The gambler, white with rage, his eyes blazing with the flame of killing, jerked his arm back, a derringer sliding down his sleeve into his ready hand. At the movement Mr. Lucas leaped sidewise and his hand became a blur. Two heavy crashes filled the room with noise and smoke, and through the fog rang out the deadly warning of the harmony-lover. Mr. Lucas glanced down at a rent in his sleeve, which very slowly was turning crimson, and sneered; Cheyenne Walters sank down beside the table, his relaxing fingers allowing the derringer mysteriously to disappear.

Mr. Lucas moved slowly forward, turned over the gambler's cards and spread them face up for all to see. Three jacks and two aces mutely bore out his words.

He exposed his own hand and the lamplight fell on the faces of three tens and a pair of fives. Evidently a clean-up had been slated to take place. Bending over he reached down and felt up the dead man's sleeve, and jerked savagely. His hand came away with a small derringer and a piece of elastic. Tossing this on the table between the two hands, he looked coldly at One-Eye Johnson, who at that moment could, in justice, have been nicknamed Pop-Eye.

"There's th' evidence, you coyote. Come on, Kid; didn't I tell you Red was too damn trustin'?" He turned back his vest and as he backed out, his friend close beside him, the yellow lamplight gleamed softly on the badge of office of a deputy sheriff of Twin River County, whose jurisdiction, now as ever, ran with his friends.

Upstairs in the hotel, Red Connors scowled at the opening door, through which came his friends Hopalong and Mesquite.

"Red," said the elder of his two visitors, "yore nerves will soon be well. You can ride in a week; but that don't suit me an' th' Kid. I'm sick of this town an' every town; I'm sick of saloons an' gamblin' hells; I'm sick of th' trail, an' everythin'. Me an' the Kid are goin' on to th' ranch, where I can set in th' sun an' whittle toys for th' kids; an' we're goin' *now*. When you get up you needn't go gunnin' for that Cheyenne buzzard; they're buryin' him an' his derringer to-morrow. Take care of yoreself an' good luck."

Before Red could frame an appropriate reply, the

door closed and steps hurried down the stairs. A moment later and he heard three horses moving around the corner of the hotel and off toward the broad trail up the North Platte. He growled something, and turned over. There was no doubt about it when Hopalong spoke like that. He was going home; and Red was right, for he was already on his way.

THE END